Pediaqu : Jurnal Pendidikan Sosial dan Humaniora
https://publisherqu.com/index.php/pediaqu/
Vol. 5, No. 4 Oktober 2026
P-ISSN:2964-7142; E-ISSN:2964-6499

THE ROLE OF LITERAL TRANSLATION IN COMMUNICATION STRATEGY BY EFL LEARNERS

Fahrinawati
IAI Darul Ulum Kandangan
erynfahrina@gmail.com

Abstract

Mastering English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is inherently complex, particularly when learners are tasked with producing spontaneous oral discourse. Deficits in lexical storage, inadequate grammatical internalization, and the acute cognitive pressures of real-time interaction frequently obstruct the seamless articulation of thoughts. To cope these linguistic barriers, EFL learners instinctively deploy an array of communication strategies. Among these, literal translation, the direct, structural, and lexical mapping of the first language (L1) into the second language (L2) stands out as one of the most common yet heavily criticized phenomena. Historically dismissed as an interlingual error rooted in negative language transfer, the strategic use of literal translation in spoken interaction remains underexplored. This research investigates the degree of literal translation functions not merely as a linguistic deficiency, but as a purposeful compensatory mechanism. Utilizing a descriptive qualitative methodology, the study observed EFL learners engaging in communicative tasks to elaborate the cognitive rationales driving their linguistic choices. The findings indicate that literal translation fulfills several vital communicative roles, including sustaining conversational momentum, bridging vocabulary gaps, articulating culturally specific L1 nuances, buying cognitive processing time, and preventing total communicative collapse. Although the resulting utterances frequently diverge from native-speaker idiomatic norms, the data reveals a substantial degree of pragmatic success, especially in group where interlocutors share a common L1.

Keywords: literal translation, communication strategy, EFL learners, English learning, language communication

INTRODUCTION

English language ability has become a crucial educational and professional requirement due to English's unparalleled worldwide standing as the main language of international discourse. Achieving oral communicative competence is still a difficult task for students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting where English is not the primary language of

everyday social contact. There are many systemic challenges in the cognitive shift from declarative knowledge (knowing vocabulary lists and grammatical rules) to procedural knowledge (accessing and structuring such knowledge spontaneously under temporal limitations). EFL students sometimes encounter a phenomenon known as a "clash between fluency and accuracy," in which performance breakdown as a result from the mental strain of creating meaningful communications in real-time.(Li & Sui, 2025)

Lexical retrieval errors, grammatical confusion, and an overall incapacity to encode abstract or complicated mental frameworks into the target language are the typical manifestations of these breakdowns. When faced with such obstacles, students don't just stop communicating. Rather, they use dynamic problem-solving techniques to close the gap between their intended communication and the language they already possess. Theoretically, these actions fall under the category of Communication Strategies (CS). (Tavakoli, 2023)

Literal translation occupies a highly controversial place within the wide range of viable methods, from circumlocution and approximation to code-switching and gestures. It happens when a student directly superimposes a fully developed conceptual framework, phrase, or syntactic structure created in their mother tongue onto the L2 while maintaining the original grammatical arrangement and lexical choices. Literal translation is strongly forbidden in traditional second language instruction, which is strongly influenced by structuralist and rigid communicative paradigms. It is commonly pathologized as a "interlingual error," a sign of negative L1 transfer that results in utterances that are uncomfortable, strange, or completely unintelligible. In an EFL classroom, teachers are typically trained to eliminate the usage of L1 and literal translation.(Almohaimeed & Almurshed, 2018)

However, the complex psycholinguistic realities of language production are ignored when this phenomenon is only assessed through a prescriptive, error-centric perspective. Can an utterance be properly classified as a failure if a student effectively uses a literal translation to convey an important message and the interlocutor understands it? Or does it serve as an effective strategic resource in that particular micro-context? According to this study, literal translation necessitates a thorough reexamination, moving the analytical emphasis from linguistic deviance to communicative functionality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. EFL Learners and English Communication

Within the educational ecosystem in which EFL students work, exposure to the target language is often limited to the classroom. In comparison to ESL (English as a Second Language) learners, this leads to a notable lack of opportunities for spontaneous output and authentic input. Comprehensible Output Hypothesis states that learners need opportunities to be "pushed" in order to create language that is both syntactically and morphologically accurate as well as semantically coherent. But pushing students above the limits of their existing interlanguage often leads to breakdowns. The concurrent demands of conceptualizing a message, retrieving appropriate vocabulary, applying grammatical rules, and managing articulation often surpass cognitive capacity for an EFL learner, leading to a reliance on heuristic shortcuts that is, the use of communication strategies (Justin Pannell, Friederike, 2017), (Sun, 2020).

2. Communication Strategies

The conceptualization of Communication Strategies (CS) has undergone significant evolution. (Ana M Fernández Dobao, 2007), defined CS from an interactional perspective as a mutual attempt by two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in the face of a deficit in the speaker's linguistic competence (Chou, 2024) adopting a psycholinguistic orientation, defined CS as potentially conscious plans for solving what an individual perceives as a problem in reaching a specific communicative objective. (Nurliana, 2020) (Phisutthangkoon, 2024) synthesized these divergent views, creating a comprehensive taxonomy that encompasses both avoidance strategies (such as message reduction or topic avoidance) and compensatory strategies (including circumlocution, word coinage, literal translation, code-switching, and non-verbal strategies). It is within this compensatory domain that literal translation is situated, acting as a linguistic life-raft when precise L2 resources are temporarily inaccessible.

3. Literal Translation

To properly understand literal translation in the context of spoken discourse, it must be rigorously differentiated from written translation paradigms. In classical translation studies. (Ping, 2024) literal translation involves converting the grammatical constructions of the source language into their nearest target language equivalents, though lexical items may still be translated somewhat out of context. It is critically distinct from word-for-word translation, which

entirely disregards L2 syntax, resulting in ungrammatical gibberish. In the context of spoken Second Language Acquisition (SLA), literal translation manifests when a learner takes an L1 lemma (the abstract mental representation of a word) or an L1 syntactic frame (such as a Topic-Comment structure) and maps it directly onto L2 lexical and syntactic parameters. This process represents the most transparent manifestation of interlingual transfer, wherein the entrenched neural pathways of the mother tongue are utilized to scaffold L2 production.

4. Literal Translation as a Communication Strategy

This section establishes the core theoretical framework of the study. The transition of literal translation from a mere "error" to a "strategy" hinges on the elements of intentionality and problem-solving. When a learner faces a communicative hurdle, a specific cognitive sequence is initiated: The learner possesses a fully formed concept in L1 → encounters a limitation or blockage in L2 resources (cannot retrieve the precise L2 lexeme or structure) → activates L1 as an alternative cognitive resource base → executes a literal translation of the L1 structure into L2 → produces an English utterance → thereby maintaining the communicative interaction.(Wulandari, 2025)

By conceptualizing the process in this manner, literal translation ceases to be a passive linguistic contagion. Instead, it is elevated to an achievement strategy. The learner is actively negotiating a pathway out of a communicative impasse. The strategy may be structurally flawed from a target-language-norm perspective, but it represents a highly rational, goal-oriented response from the perspective of interlanguage performance.

RESEARCH METHOD

1. Research Design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design. Given that the research questions fundamentally interrogate how a phenomenon occurs, what functions it serves, and why learners utilize it, a qualitative approach is not merely appropriate but essential. The descriptive nature of the design allows for the thick description (Younas et al., 2023) of the phenomena as they naturally unfold within an educational setting.

2. Participants

The participants comprised 20 EFL learners enrolled in UPB Class of IAI Darul Ulum Kandangan. The participants were specifically selected at the intermediate proficiency level, benchmarked by institutional TOEFL score ranges between 450 and 500. This specific proficiency level was deliberately chosen because beginner learners often lack the foundational syntactic knowledge even to attempt literal translation (frequently relying instead on isolated single words or complete silence), whereas advanced learners rarely require it due to an expansive L2 lexical repertoire. Intermediate learners represent the optimal demographic where communicative intent consistently outpaces linguistic competence, thereby triggering a high frequency of compensatory strategies. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their willingness to engage and their active participation in class discussions.

3. Data Collection

The data was achieved through the utilization of three distinct instruments to ensure depth, validity, and reliability:

a. Recorded Speaking Activities: Participants were organized into 10 groups. They were assigned three controversial and engaging topics (e.g., the implementation of strict school regulations, the psychological impact of social media, and the ethics of arranged marriages) specifically chosen to stimulate genuine, opinion-based discussion rather than rote memorization or scripted dialogue. Each group conversed for 15 minutes per topic. The sessions were captured using high-fidelity audio recording equipment to ensure subtle hesitations, prosodic features, and immediate interlocutor reactions were documented.

b. Observation: The researcher functioned as a non-participant observer, utilizing a structured observation protocol to document paralinguistic features including hand gestures, facial expressions, and temporal pauses that accompanied the literal translations, thereby providing essential context to the raw video data.

c. Interview: The researcher conducted an interview to learn the rationale behind the literal translation approach.

4. Data Analysis

The analysis of the data adhered to a rigorous, multi-staged systematic process:

Transcription: All speaking activities were transcribed verbatim, meticulously noting pauses, overlaps, and intonation markers.

Identification: In order to identify instances of literal translation, the researcher and a peer coder separately examined the transcripts, always contrasting the English phrase with its L1 conceptual equivalent.

Classification: The identified instances were categorized based on their linguistic level (lexical, phrasal, syntactic, idiomatic).

Contextual Analysis: The surrounding discourse was thoroughly analyzed to understand the specific conversational pressure present at the exact moment of strategy deployment.

Analysis of Communicative Function: The data was coded to isolate the learner's stated rationales for utilizing the strategy, subsequently grouping them into functional categories (e.g., buying time, compensating for vocabulary deficits).

Analysis of Communicative Outcome: The interlocutor's immediate verbal and non-verbal response following the literal translation was analyzed to determine if the message was successfully negotiated.

Interpretation: The final stage involved synthesizing the quantitative frequencies of outcomes to draw robust theoretical conclusions.

5. Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness, rigor, and credibility of the qualitative data, several established strategies were implemented. Methodological Triangulation: Continuously comparing the audio recording data with the observational field notes and the interviewed data to ensure consistency of findings. Peer Debriefing / Intercoder Reliability: A colleague possessing expertise in applied linguistics independently coded 30% of the raw data. Any discrepancies in identifying and categorizing literal translations were subjected to rigorous discussion until a consensus exceeding 90% agreement was reached.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Results

The analysis of the recorded speaking activities revealed a pervasive and unmistakable presence of literal translation across all 10 dyads. The data clearly illustrated that learners

utilized this strategy across multiple levels of linguistic complexity. The following formats exemplify the primary forms identified, structured as: L1 Concept → Literal English Expression → Intended Meaning.

1. Literal Lexical Translation

This manifestation was the most frequently occurring form. Learners translated single semantic units directly, disregarding L2 collocational norms.

L1 Concept: "Buku tulis" (Notebook)

Learner Utterance: "I just brought a book write."

Intended Meaning: "I just brought a notebook."

Context: The learner was explaining their preparedness for class. Unable to retrieve the precise target word "notebook," they combined the literal translations of "buku" (book) and "tulisan/tulis" (write) to create a novel interlanguage compound.

2. Literal Phrase Translation

In this category, learners translated standard L1 collocations or verb phrases verbatim, violating L2 lexical bundles.

L1 Concept: "Buang-buang waktu" (Wasting time)

Learner Utterance: "If we just wait here, it is throw-throw time."

Intended Meaning: "If we just wait here, it is a waste of time."

Context: During a heated discussion on procrastination, the learner lacked the idiomatic English phrase "waste of time" and directly translated the L1 verb "buang" (throw) and noun "waktu" (time).

3. Literal Syntactic Transfer

Here, learners inappropriately applied L1 grammatical rules, particularly regarding topic-prominence, to the English utterance.

L1 Concept: "Saya lagi pusing kepala." (I am having a headache / My head is dizzy)

Learner Utterance: "I am dizzy head right now."

Intended Meaning: "I have a headache."

Context: The learner utilized a classic L1 Topic-Comment structure, inappropriately placing the state of being "dizzy" before the body part "head," which directly violates standard English adjective-noun syntax rules.

4. Literal Idiomatic Translation

This highly complex form occurred when learners attempted to translate culturally specific L1 idioms that completely lack a direct English equivalent.

L1 Concept: "Masuk angin" (A culturally specific Indonesian concept of wind causing illness)

Learner Utterance: "Yesterday I was sick because I got enter wind."

Intended Meaning: "Yesterday I caught a cold."

Context: The learner attempted to convey a specific local ailment by literally translating "masuk" (enter) and "angin" (wind), resulting in a highly opaque L2 utterance.

The data harvested from the Interviews provided profound and unprecedented insights into the cognitive mechanisms driving these linguistic choices. Contrary to the traditional assumption that learners are entirely unaware of their structural deviations, the interview data proved that literal translation serves highly specific, goal-oriented communicative functions:

a. Maintaining Communication Flow

During the interview sessions, learners frequently expressed a profound psychological aversion to conversational silence. One participant explicitly stated, "I know 'book write' is wrong, but if I stop to think of the real word, the conversation will die. I just wanted to keep talking." In this capacity, literal translation acts as a conversational lubricant, prioritizing the social imperative of continuous speech over strict lexical accuracy.

b. Compensating for Vocabulary Limitations

This was the most explicitly stated and commonly observed function. When experiencing a tip-of-the-tongue state, learners actively defaulted to L1 lexical mapping. A participant noted, "I forgot the word 'notebook'. My brain was empty. So, I just used 'book write' because I knew you [the interlocutor] would understand what a book for writing is." It functions fundamentally as an emergency semantic bridge.

c. Expressing L1-Based Concepts

When discussing localized issues, learners felt that the L1 conceptualization carried greater precision or emotional weight. In the case of "enter wind," the participant explained, "In English,

you just say 'cold'. But 'masuk angin' is different. I wanted to explain the exact feeling, so I translated it directly hoping you would get the idea." Literal translation here serves as an attempt to transfer cultural nuance rather than just lexical meaning.

d. Buying Time

The cognitive process of formulating a literal translation inherently requires mental effort, which paradoxically functions as an effective stalling tactic. By uttering "throw-throw time," the learner's articulatory apparatus remains active while their brain subconsciously searches for alternative ways to expand on their argument. It effectively prevents the interlocutor from interrupting or hijacking the conversational turn.

e. Avoiding Communication Breakdown

In scenarios where learners felt cornered by a direct, probing question from the interlocutor, avoidance strategies were not a viable option. Literal translation became a defensive psychological mechanism. A learner stated, "You asked me directly what happened to me. I couldn't say 'I don't know the word in English.' So, 'dizzy head' was the only way I could answer you without making myself look stupid or ending the conversation completely."

B. Discussion

1. Literal Translation Beyond Linguistic Error

The empirical findings of this study present a direct challenge to the traditional paradigm that defines literal translation unequivocally as an interlingual error. The fundamental analytical question must shift from "How can this structural deviation be corrected?" to "What specific communicative function does this deviation perform within the ongoing discourse?" An utterance that is syntactically anomalous and idiomatically incorrect (such as "I am dizzy head") should not be interpreted as evidence of total linguistic incompetence. Rather, it serves as tangible proof that the learner possesses a strong volition to participate actively in the target language discourse. Viewed through the lens (Salma Mu’min Shiddiq, 2022) Interlanguage theory, such production demonstrates that learners are actively testing cognitive hypotheses about how the L2 operates, utilizing the most readily available tools from their L1 to construct meaning.

2. Literal Translation and L1 Transfer

The symbiotic relationship between literal translation and L1 transfer is incontrovertible. However, diverging from the behaviorist perspective—which stigmatized transfer as an exclusively negative, interfering force—this study highlights the cognitive agility inherent in transfer. The L1 functions as a cognitive scaffolding mechanism. When L2 resources are depleted under processing pressure, the L1 actively intervenes to "rescue" the communicative act. The process of literal translation provides empirical evidence that the L1 is never fully deactivated or suppressed during L2 production; instead, both linguistic systems operate dynamically, synergistically, and simultaneously within the learner's cognitive architecture.

3. Literal Translation as a Compensatory Strategy

Within the comprehensive taxonomy proposed by (Nash & Contreras, 2025) literal translation is most accurately categorized as a compensatory strategy. When a learner experiences a critical failure in accessing the correct target language lexical item, they do not elect to employ a reduction strategy (such as abandoning the message or abruptly switching topics). Instead, they creatively generate an "interlanguage neologism" via literal translation. From a psycholinguistic standpoint, this strategy is highly efficient regarding temporal cognitive demands. Attempting to recall the correct target word, or attempting a complex circumlocution (e.g., "a book that we use to write in class"), consumes significantly more cognitive energy and processing time than the immediate, instinctual translation of "book write."

4. Effectiveness versus Accuracy

The most critical theoretical contribution of this study lies in its deconstruction of the deeply ingrained assumption that Accuracy equals Communicative Success. The qualitative data unequivocally demonstrates that an utterance can be entirely unnatural, idiomatically incorrect, and structurally deviant, yet remain highly effective in transmitting its core message. Communicative success in this context is heavily mediated by situational context, paralinguistic cues, and, crucially, the shared background knowledge of the interlocutors. Because the participants in this study shared the same L1 (Indonesian), when a learner articulated "throw-throw time," the interlocutor—who was likely processing the conversation with a underlying L1 cognitive framework—instantly and subconsciously reverse-mapped the literal translation back to "buang-buang waktu." In this specific interlocutor dynamic, inaccuracy directly facilitated

communicative success. This finding aligns with (Algahwash & Khalleefah, 2024) Interaction Hypothesis, emphasizing that communication is an iterative process of negotiation, not a solo performance of grammatical perfection.

CONCLUSION

This study has comprehensively investigated the multifaceted role of literal translation within the communication strategies of EFL learners. The data unequivocally demonstrates that learners deploy literal translation across various linguistic strata, encompassing lexical, phrasal, syntactic, and idiomatic levels. Far from being a random linguistic mistake, this strategy fulfills critical communicative functions: it sustains the momentum of dialogue, compensates for acute vocabulary deficits, allows for the expression of culturally bound L1 concepts, provides essential cognitive processing time, and acts as a vital defense mechanism against total conversational breakdown. The primary catalysts for its deployment are the intense temporal pressures of real-time interaction and the psychological imperative to project communicative competence. Crucially, the analysis of communicative outcomes reveals that literal translation yields a high degree of pragmatic success, particularly when interlocutors share a common L1 background, thereby challenging the orthodox equation of grammatical accuracy with communicative efficacy. The overarching pedagogical implication is a call for a more empathetic, context-sensitive approach to error handling in the EFL classroom. Ultimately, literal translation should not be understood solely as a linguistic error; in certain communicative contexts, it may function as a strategic resource that enables EFL learners to maintain interaction despite limited L2 proficiency.

DAFTAR PUSTAKA

Algahwash, N. A. O., & Khalleefah, H. M. A. (2024). Evolving Trends in Second Language Acquisition Research: A Narrative Review. *International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews*, *5*(11), 2808–2818.

Almohaimeed, M. S., & Almurshed, H. M. (2018). Foreign Language Learners' Attitudes and Perceptions of L1 Use in L2 Classroom. *Arab World English Journal (AWEJ)*, *9*(4), 433–446.

Ana M Fernández Dobao, I. M. P. M. (2007). Negotiating Meaning in Interaction between English and Spanish Speakers via Communicative Strategies. *Atlantis*, *1*(June), 87–105.

Chou, M. (2024). Communication Strategies , Difficulties , and Speaking Tasks in Foreign Language Learning. *Sage*, *September*, 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440241266324

Justin Pannell, Friederike, N. F. (2017). The Output Hypothesis: From Theory to Practice. *TESOL Working Paper Series*, 126–159.

Li, C., & Sui, M. (2025). *The relationship between complexity , accuracy and fluency in L2 English speech : Individual differences and dynamic patterns* (Vol. 15, Issue 3). Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu.

Nash, A. A., & Contreras, O. R. (2025). Perceptions of how foreign language instructional strategies may enhance adult learners' speaking skills. *Australian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, *8*(3).

Nurliana. (2020). COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY HIGHER EDUCATIONAL STUDENTS IN ORAL PRESENTATION OF DAYAK NGAJU LANGUAGE. *JOLLT Journal of Languages and Language Teaching*, *8*(2), 108–119.

Phisutthangkoon, K. (2024). The Use of English Communication Strategies by Thai EFL Interns. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, *23*(12), 512–538.

Ping, Y. (2024). *The View from Here Revisiting translation as a method in language teaching and learning*. *80*(May).

Salma Mu'min Shiddiq, L. O. (2022). INTERLANGUAGE CONCERNING FOSSILIZATION AND UNIVERSAL GRAMMAR : A LITERATURE REVIEW ON SECOND. *Journal of English for Academic and Specific Purposes*, *5*(2), 353–360.

Sun, W. (2020). The Output Hypothesis and Its Implications for Language Teaching. *Journal of Advances in Education Research*, *5*(3), 129–134.

Tavakoli, P. (2023). Making fluency research accessible to second language teachers: the impact of a training intervention. *Language Teaching Research*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362168820951213

Wulandari, N. (2025). Exploring Students ' Oral Communication Problems and Strategies in the Intermediate Communication Skill Course Novita Wulandari Abstrak. *Retain: Journal of Research in English Language Teaching*, *13*(01), 40–48.

Younas, A., Sergi, F., Durante, A., Escalante, E. L., Inayat, S., & Ali, P. (2023). *Proposing the " MIRACLE " Narrative Framework for Providing Thick Description in Qualitative Research*. 1–13. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221147162