Acceptable Classroom Use of Electronic Translation Devices for English Learners

Earpiece interpretation and other real-time electronic translation devices, such as pens and pocket translators, are often acquired to help English Learners (ELs) understand instructions or access academic content. They could be seen as a temporary support that local education agencies (LEAs) use as an appropriate action to overcome language barriers in accordance with federal law (20 U.S.C. §1701 (1974)). While earpiece translators do not violate Tennessee's English-only rules, using them requires LEAs to establish clear policy alignment to emphasize that they are intended as temporary support for language access. Earpiece translators may provide immediate translation of classroom instructions and their use in the classroom environment can counteract the goal of promoting English language acquisition to proficiency.

Tennessee's ESL programming is built upon the practice of immersing students in English to foster sustained academic and linguistic success. Effective language acquisition requires consistent, meaningful practice and comprehension of language in context (Vygotsky, 1978; Krashen, 1985; Swain, 1995; Long, 1996; Nation, 2001). Real-time translators limit this by offering a word-for-word substitution rather than a deeper understanding. Because language acquisition thrives on immersion and frequent practice, language acquisition is often reduced if students default to translation instead of engaging with English directly (Goldenberg, 2008; Turnbull & Dailey-O'Cain, 2009; García & Wei, 2014). Likewise, if students rely on earpiece translators for extended periods, they may have fewer opportunities to actively practice listening to and processing English.

When students are constantly receiving translations, they may not develop listening comprehension skills as effectively, leading to slower progress in understanding spoken English (Krashen, 1985; Lynch, 1988; Swain & Lapkin, 1995; Field, 2008; Macedo, 2019). Language learning requires more than just word-for-word translation (Lado, 1957; Ellis, 2005; Cook, 2016). Earpiece translators typically don't convey nuanced meanings, idiomatic expressions, or cultural context effectively. Relying on them can prevent students from building a deeper, contextual understanding of English vocabulary and expressions that are key to fluency. Listening to English without translation builds students' ability to recognize words, phrases, and grammatical structures in real time (Brown & Yule, 1983; Krashen, 1985; Field, 2008; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012; Rost, 2016). Language acquisition also involves cognitive engagement with the language—processing, making meaning, and self-correcting. If translation happens instantly, students may miss the cognitive processing involved in figuring out meaning from context clues, body language, or previous knowledge, which are important skills for language development (Gibbons, 1991; Early & Marshall, 2008). Additionally, overreliance on translation and interpretation technology can also create a dependency, causing students to feel unprepared to interact in English-only settings and possibly diminishing their confidence in using English independently and therefore, limiting an

EL's willingness to take risks with language, which is an essential part of learning. Dependency on technology may also inhibit social and cognitive interactions in English, as language acquisition is reinforced by conversations with teachers and peers in authentic contexts (Kern, 2014; Hwang, Wu, & Chen, 2012; Hwang &Wu, 2014). Without these interactions, students miss out on the essential cognitive engagement required for meaningful language learning, which involves interpreting context clues, making inferences, and self-correcting.

The use of earpiece interpretation and/or electronic translation devices, therefore, stands in contrast to Tennessee's instructional goals for EL students, which emphasize English immersion and active engagement as vital for sustainable language development. While use sparingly may be initially beneficial to help with navigating the school environment (particularly for newcomers), it goes against what English Learner programming in Tennessee should be. By encouraging direct interaction with English rather than translation aids, we can more effectively help students integrate into English instruction and support their long-term academic achievement. For these reasons, we recommend that earpiece translators not be adopted in classroom settings. Instead, LEAs should invest in proven instructional practices that support English immersion and scaffolded language support to provide students with a solid foundation for both language and academic success.

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