The use of translation in EFL classes as L2 learning practice

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Abstract

The use of L1 in EFL classes has always been discussed controversially. Some research support the idea of its inclusion while some others do not. Some others still claim that it should be used for certain purposes. This study analyzes elementary learners’ reaction to the use of translation as a L2 learning practice. A classroom-based research that lasted 7 weeks was conducted with 28 learners who were taught some grammatical subjects through the exercises based on translation as a L2 learning practice technique. Following this period, the participants were asked for their perceptions of this learning experience through a questionnaire as well as interview questions adapted from Liao (2002). Results of the study show that learners, in general, have had positive ideas that support the use of translation as a practice. More specifically, they believe that use of translation helps them reading comprehension and memorize target vocabulary. They also report as their frequently used strategies that they use bilingual dictionaries and translate the text first and then try to understand it. The study concludes that translation tasks could promote learners’ receptive skills and productive skills.

1. Introduction

The integration of translation-based learning activities into foreign language learning classrooms has been debated for a longtime. Translation is considered a justifiable pedagogical tool especially in an EFL environment, and this tool needs to be explored and used (Harmer 1991:62, Ellis 1992:46; Ur 1996:40). However, there have been few studies investigating translation as a teaching and learning practice (Atkinson 1993; Eadie 1999). In addition, little has been said about the methodology in which translation practice can be turned into a systematic pedagogical tool. This study attempts to apply translation teaching and learning practice in classroom and reveals how this application could influence learners’ views about use of translation for this purpose.

2. Literature Review

Traditionally, teaching foreign languages in the ‘western’ sphere was based on the understanding that the way into the new language was always through the students’ own first language (Cook 2003: 32, Lewis 2009: 218). It should also be underlined that that language competence is a two-way system by which we need to be able communicate into and from the language system (Duff, 1989). It seems that learners connect knowledge of foreign language to that of their L1 through comparison and contrast, which is inevitable. Teachers can facilitate learning through
guided translation tasks. However, unfortunately this potential is not investigated as some studies tend to reveal why it should be banned in EFL settings (Duff, 1989; Atkinson, 1993; Urgese, 1989). On the other hand, Popovic (2001) claim that criticisms against it are not valid, that learners need it, and that it promotes their learning. Similarly, Hsieh (2000) conducted a research to understand attitudes and thoughts toward translation, with 52 Taiwanese college students at the end of one year of EFL instruction using a translation method. The results show that 85% expressed that translating helps pay attention to the coherence and contextualization of English reading tasks, 73% learned the importance of their native language, 65% became more aware of multiple meanings of an English word, 62% extended their vocabulary knowledge and reading skills. Another study was carried out by Carreres (2006), who administered a questionnaire (11 questions) to second and third year students of modern languages degree at the University of Cambridge concerning students’ perception about translation as a language learning activity, by translation into L2 exercises and text translations (literary, film, journalistic writing). She found out that translation exercises are useful for language learning and it is the best way to test fully that a text has been fully understood. Again, these results confirm that translation into L2 is consistently regarded by students as a very effective language learning activity. Lewis (2009) carried out a classroom-based research, designed for literate Spanish-speaking adults in Mexico to learn about learners’ perceptions of their experience and concluded that the inclusion of the L1 reduces anxiety, enhances the effective environment for learning, takes into account socio-cultural factors, facilitates incorporation of learners’ life experiences, and allows for learner-centered curriculum development. These conclusions were also found in the study of Auerbach (1993). Nolasco & Arthur (1995:59) claims that translation activities in an EFL classroom ought to meet the following criteria: 1. Language is used for a purpose, 2. They create a desire for communication, 3. They encourage students to be creative and contribute their ideas, 4. Students are focused on what they are saying rather than how they are saying it, 5. Students work independently of the teacher and 6. Students determine what they want to say or write. Similarly, the teacher should have the same mother tongue as the students, the students, adult learners disposed towards conscious learning, should be interested in considering formal accuracy together with the language taught as a foreign language rather than as a second language (Heltai, 1989:289, Stibbard 1994:13). It seems that translation as a learning practice is favored by learners as it promotes different aspects of learning. This is probably because learners confirm the grammatical patterns in FL with the equivalent ones in L1. Therefore, translation as a practice in EFL setting should be carefully designed and performed if effective results are expected.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants and setting

The study was carried out at a preparatory school with 28 elementary students learning English intensively for their academic education in different majors. They were taught pronouns, the singular / plural forms, there is / there are etc. structures through translation exercises for 7 weeks. Two hours per week were allocated for translation practice in which the students were required to translate Turkish sentences into English. They were also assigned to do related activities outside the classroom.

3.2 Data Collection

The instruments used in this study consist of two sets of questionnaires as IBT (The Inventory for Beliefs about Translation) and ITLS (The Inventory for Translation as a Learning Strategy) and the Interview Guide adapted from Liao (2006) which are used to measure beliefs, strategy use and interviewing process. The instruments were translated from English into Turkish by a translator and another researcher so as to state the questions clearly for the students at elementary levels and create reliability for the nature of the research.

3.3 Data Analysis

The quantitative analysis of the two set questionnaires was analyzed using SPSS by an expert in that field. Descriptive statistics like frequencies, means and standard deviations were calculated to conclude the participants’ responses to the IBT and the ILTS and provide a basis to address two research questions.
3.4 Research Questions
The study sought the following research questions:
1. What are the beliefs of Turkish learners of English who learned through translation as a L2 learning practice?
2. What translation related strategies do Turkish learners of English use in learning English?

4. Findings

4.1 Findings from the questionnaire

To reveal the learners’ beliefs in using translation as L2 learning practice, participants were asked to rate the IBT items on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, identifying the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with the beliefs about translation. The results of the questionnaire are shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Belief Item Description</th>
<th>Mean</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Translating helps me understand textbook readings</td>
<td>4,35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translating helps me memorize English vocabulary</td>
<td>4,13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translating helps me write English composition</td>
<td>3,91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Translating helps me speak English</td>
<td>3,91</td>
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</tbody>
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According to the findings in Table 1, learners believe that translation is an aid to developing reading comprehension skills, vocabulary development, composition writing and speaking. They seem to believe that doing translation for learning promotes first their receptive skills and then productive skills, which could also give insight into their strategies of learning as well. This is supported by the findings of Carreres (2006) that regarding translation into English, the highest score (93%) went to the learning of vocabulary in the foreign language as well as of Hsieh’s (2000) that translation helped their reading comprehension. Additionally, the students have great desire to remember the target input when they need it in a communicative environment. They would like to have their knowledge to be well-fixed on their mind so that they would be more courageous to put it into practice while speaking. They also do not get isolated from their L1. They would prefer to reach their target, thinking in English here, first putting their life jacket on, Turkish language, rather than leave it behind. That is one of the reasons why they are in favor of having interaction with the peers in and out of the classroom. Lewis (2009:228) stated that the incorporation of the learner’s prior knowledge and experience in the relation of what is being learned to a known reality offers a starting point for language learning. Titford (1985) agrees with this statement by proposing that translation can serve as a problem-solving exercise as well as a cognitive exercise in the classroom. Although learners refer to translation saying that they better understand the grammatical concepts such as tenses, adjectives, singular/plural forms etc. it is not to present the language in L1 as in the Grammar-Translation method, but to practice it with translation from L1 to L2 that is meant. Otherwise, they do not feel capable enough to put the equivalent of the target language in the source language which may cause them to feel lost in learning process.

To address the second research question that sought learners’ strategies, participants were also asked to rate the ITLS items on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, identifying the degree to which they use strategies. The results of the questionnaire are shown in Table 2.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Strategies Item Description</th>
<th>Mean</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I use English-Turkish dictionaries to help myself learn English.</td>
<td>4,35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I use Turkish-English dictionaries to help myself learn English. 4,13
When reading an English text, I first translate it into Turkish in my mind to help me understand its meaning 3,91
After I read English articles, I use an available Turkish translation to check if my comprehension is correct. 3,91
I memorize the meaning of new English vocabulary words by remembering their Turkish translation 3,91

Following the IBT, the participants were requested to rate items on a Likert scale of 1 to 5 identifying how frequently they resorted to using translation as a learning strategy. As can be seen on Table 1, learners use translation strategies for reading and vocabulary development skills. The strategies used by participants supplement, are consistent and have a positive correlation with their beliefs. Reading skills were replaced by vocabulary compensation using bilingual dictionaries demonstrating the effect of translation on self-study in which the learner is independent and that the inclusion of L1 helps the learner enhance independent study skills (Bolitho 2003, K.A. Brooks-Lewis 2009:233). Besides, the results validate Liao, who expresses that students most frequently use translation to learn English vocabulary words, idioms, phrases (Liao P. 2006: 203) and Prince’s (1996) observation that students believe that translation learning, with the new word being linked to its native language equivalent, is more effective in learning new vocabulary. Students learning a language implicitly or explicitly reward themselves with translation whether their teachers like it or not (Carreres 2006:13). The participants also indicated that they first translate a text into Turkish and then try to understand its meaning since they want to be fully satisfied with their correct comprehension as discussed earlier. Translation is a real life communicative activity they translate in class, decode signs and notices in the environment, translate instructions and letters for friends etc. (Popovic, 2001) stands for the reason why they can memorize words better using translation. Translation enhances their cognitive skills making them more able to recall the meanings on their mind and more capable of putting the equivalence in production as indicated in their beliefs.

4.2 Findings from the interviews

The students were also asked to comment on the effects of the learning through translation after the application process. The first question was how they feel about using Turkish-English translation to learn English. The following negative and positive comments were elicited.

Positive responses
«While translating sentences, we unconsciously learn a lot such as structure, form, vocabulary most of which are in Reading, in particular! It does not hinder ability to learn English because if I can translate an English text into Turkish, it means that I know English well.» (Interview, #1)
«I love translation! I want to learn on my own, I like analysing sentences, I like understanding their meanings by myself » (Interview, #2)
Provided that it is used to practice, it suits to the learner. You can understand how the structure is formed in English, but, during translation process you see how frequently it is used in your own language which makes you say: I can use it when needed.» (Interview, #3)

Learners made deeper analysis of unconscious translation (silent translation as used by Titford, 1985:78) mentioning the positive effect in reading skill. It seems inevitable for them to avoid translation considered as an enjoyable activity. It could be inferred that they also stimulate their own conscious learning understanding the logic in a target structure, as a sign of their interest in finding new structures independently. These comments were also ranked important in questionnaires.

Negative responses
«To translate interferes with the ability to learn English» (Interview, #4) «You don’t feel so much in need of translation because the knowledge gets fixed on your mind.» (Interview, #5) «Everything should be in English at first. Turkish should be referred in case of an emergency to make clear» (Interview, #6).

These negative comments obtained from higher proficiency students imply that learners’ prior knowledge of L2 needs to be considered during the use of translation activities because such learners prefer to learn through L2
rather than translation which required the use of L1. It seems that translation activities may also lead to confusion in learning.

The second question was about how useful the activities have been as a means of learning English. The following responses were elicited from the participants.

“I understood the grammatical rules better. I also noticed the importance of word order in terms of emphasis in the sentence” (Interview, #1). “For me they were really beneficial because I cannot do anything without understanding fully. To illustrate, the doctors are taught some terms in Latin and the Turkish equivalents. Otherwise, they would be a butcher who is unable to treat someone” (Interview, #2). “Yes, for instance, I remember “There is, There are” thanks to those exercises. We described the pictures in which there was a cupboard and a boy. Then we translated some sentences like those we did in the classroom in English. They also helped me to speak to native teachers” (Interview, #3). “It is absolutely learnt better when you have the meaning of the structures allowing to recall better. You learn structures in English but the practise had better be in Turkish in terms of meaning” (Interview, #7).

It is argued that learners need to have acquired a significant level of proficiency in the language before they can tackle translation productively. However, students proved the exact reference to translation practice in order to correlate the grammatical concepts in both languages as clearly observed in the interview data. They could extend their knowledge using the mother tongue as a first aid and clarify the similarities and the differences between the foreign and their native language. Contrary to negative responses, most students have a strong basis for the reason why they should refer to translation in foreign language learning process. Even some who still tend to think in English at the earliest level of learning are in favour of referring translation when needed. This confirms that learners of a foreign language do refer to their mother tongue to aid the process of acquisition of L2. Translation into L2 can help them systematize and rationalize a learning mechanism that is taking place anyway (Carreres 2006:6).

5. Conclusion

While it is vital to make a differentiation between the Grammar-Translation Method and use of translation as a L2 learning practice in EFL settings, this study makes emphasis on the benefits of translation for L2 learning by putting the learners’ perceptions and strategies ahead. There is enough evidence that these activities were not designed with the aim of preparing best translators as a profession, but to create better foreign language learning via translation. The findings of the research obviously present that students, at the beginning steps of learning in particular, tend to translate naturally to determine whether their comprehension is fully satisfying not only in classroom but also in four main skills. To make learning significant, it is vital for the learner to identify how the new information fits with the information already possessed. Otherwise, it is only memorization of disconnected knowledge (cited in Brooks-Lewis 2009:228). It is also shown in this article that translation allows students to compare and contrast the L1 and target language playing a positive role in students’ cognitive, memory, compensation and social strategies. They feel more endorsed in learning process noticing the equivalent of the target structure in their mother tongue and practicing those in communication. Students indicating that use of translation enables them to interact with the peers also give us an insight into the efficacy of translation in communicative teaching and learning environment. They were in favor of feeling more involved in L2 learning without anxiety, developing interpersonal abilities and managing their independent study skills which are among the mile stones of communicative language teaching. These reports highlight the need to revise the analysis of learners’ needs to better suit the translation program to language teaching, in other words, have a more realistic and inclusive model for its pedagogical use (Carreres, 2006). Surely, the fact comes around here as to view the translator as a life-long language learner and the language learner as a natural translator (Carreres, 2006). Despite oppositions, both sides agree upon the following question “Should translation be introduced at initial stages to practice foreign language?” echoing “Definitely yes!” which was a clear indicator put forward in the study. Learners in this study would like to and need to learn grammatical patterns through translation activities as they feel surer to have learnt the target input by matching or mismatching with those in their own language.
References

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