

**TRANSLATION: A PROBLEM-SOLVING PROCEDURE
FOR ALGERIAN ENGLISH LEARNERS**

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Although the use of translation in learning a foreign language (FL) is banned and discouraged by many language teachers, this technique is widely used by EFL learners in their learning process. It appears that they often use translation as a learning strategy to comprehend, remember, and produce a FL i.e. they utilize their L1 knowledge in order to solve a production or learning problem in FL. However, relatively little research attention seems to have been devoted to a consideration of the use of translation in language learning. Thus, the present paper investigates Algerian EFL university students' use of translation as a writing strategy. The data collected from a production task (a narrative essay writing) and think-aloud protocols will address the following questions:

- 1) How do Algerian EFL students use translation to solve their writing problems?
- 2) To what extent are these writers successful in their linguistic production when using translation?

The results will give insights into how Algerian EFL learners use translation from L1 in their FL writing, and therefore will enable the development of a technique for teaching learners how to help themselves by using effectively translation.

INTRODUCTION

Translation has been used by foreign language learners to facilitate language learning for centuries, but the role of translation in this process is viewed differently by the various language teaching methods. The Grammar-Translation method, which was dominant during the first half of the 20th century, considers it as an inherent part of FL teaching. It stressed translation and grammatical analysis as necessary means to learn a new language.

Then, this method and its techniques were denounced and gave way to the Direct Method and the Audio-Lingual Method which advocated maximum exposure to the target language, with no recourse either to L1 or to translation. During this period, translation used to be regarded as an impediment to the learning process and its use was banned in language teaching. In the current most popular Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, the target language is used during authentic, functional, communicative activities, and students' native language has no particular role in the classroom. Many CLT teachers maintain that the best way for learners to achieve native-like control of the target language is to think in that language rather than to translate or reprocess the target language into their mother tongue. However, learners seem to use very often translation as a strategy to comprehend, remember and produce a FL/ L2. In addition, more and more studies have suggested a positive and facilitative role of translation or L1 transfer in students' language learning. (Baynham 1983; Perkins 1985; Ellis 1985; Atkinson 1987; Newmark 1991; Husain 1994; Kern 1994; Husain 1995; Prince 1996; Cohen and Brooks-Carson 2001). Then it seems important to consider **how our learners use translation as a learning strategy and to what extent it helps them to be successful in their learning/production tasks**. For this purpose, an investigation into the use of translation as a writing strategy was undertaken on EFL students at Tlemcen University.

TRANSLATION AS A LEARNING STRATEGY

In addition to its usual definition in transferring meanings and conveying messages, translation can also be viewed as a strategy for learning foreign languages. Oxford (1990) defines translating as 'converting the target language expression into the native language (at various levels, from words and phrases all the way up to whole texts); or converting the native language into the target language' (p. 46). Likewise, Chamot (1987) describes the translation strategy as 'using the first language as a base for understanding and/or producing the second language' (p. 77). In language learning strategy research many classifications of strategies were carried out and translation has usually been identified as one of the cognitive learning strategies (O'Malley & Chamot 1990; Oxford 1985; Graham 1997) i.e., a strategy that helps the comprehension, learning, handling or retention of material by means of direct mental manipulation or transformation of that material.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

The present study was undertaken on a sample of 16 EFL students at the University of Tlemcen from the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th years. They were asked to write a narrative essay of 150 words in three languages: Arabic, French and English. At the same time, they had to verbalize their thoughts (they received training in the use of the think-aloud technique prior to the experiment). The verbal report was recorded on a tape then transcribed.

RESULTS

HOW WAS TRANSLATION USED?

In this study translation refers to rendering words or ideas from one language to another in a verbatim manner, or transferring a structure. Two types of translation were recorded:

**Direct translation:* when the writer translates from one language to the language used in writing such as translating from French to English:

e.g. ça sort de l'ordinaire _____ it exits from the ordinary.

**Indirect translation:* the writer translates from one language to a median language, then to the language used in writing. When the learner cannot find his word/ words through a direct translation, he uses a median language which could be Arabic, French, or English depending on the context, to facilitate translation into the language used in writing such as translating from Arabic to French to reach English:

e.g. البستان _____ le jardin _____ the garden

Translation was used by subject students to solve their language problems in writing i.e., when not finding how to say a word, to express an idea or when not being sure of the meaning expressed by their sentence/s, they used translation either **to produce** the TL or **to comprehend** it. In their linguistic production, translation was done at two levels:

At the Lexical Level

When writing students often faced the obstacle of not finding the appropriate vocabulary in the TL. They, therefore, resorted to the use of translation. This helped them generate their sentences as it can be seen in the following extracts from their verbal protocols. In the first and second examples the students used a direct translation (in e.g.1 from French to English and in e.g.2 from English to Arabic), while in the third example the informant used an indirect one (from Arabic to French to English).

e.g.1 ...ils ont fait des pieds et des mains ... they made hands and feet to
...to ... quitter ... leave away...

e.g.2... في الأخير تنهد وقال... وقال

Eh...the will ...the will....

الإرادة هي الإرادة و...الشجاعة و...مكنتا الشعب الجزائري من الانتصار

.....

e.g.3 ... he is one of those who assist to the ... Fellaoucen ندير
... the Fellaoucen معركة ... bataille ? ... كيش تقولو معركة؟ he told

me ... ماثني he told me ... he is one of who assist the Fellaoucen
معركة ...

l'anglais و خلاص battle... battle معركة ما نيش عارف كيش يقولولها ب
where he has lost one leg,

As it can be noted from the above examples, students' translation was not always successful.

At the Syntactic Level

Translation was also recorded at the syntactic level. Some students tended to transfer the structure of one language to write in another language as revealed by their verbal protocols. For example, in English writing some students tended to use the "of construction" instead of the possessive case following the Arabic word order.

e.g.1 ... the exploits of my grandfather in this period.

... They brain (burn)... euh destroy the houses of people ...

Or placed the adjective after the noun which is usual in Arabic and French.

e.g.2 ... my grandfather was a soldier courageous

We have also noted the use of some sentences in French writing which had an Arabic structure

e.g.3 Mon grand père est un entre les Algériens qui ont participé dans cette guerre...

This is a translation of : جدي واحد من بين الجزائريين الذين شاركوا في هذه الحرب .

As mentioned above translation was also used to insure comprehension namely in the foreign languages. For example, after reading the topic some students translated it in order to understand it. This strategy was also used when students produced a sentence or a word in the TL language and wanted to make sure that it carried the meaning they wanted to convey.

e.g.1 Finally I think that I'm very fier , la fierete... non I am very satisfied ... satisfait ... oui c'est ça only this I'm very satisfied by ... by the things my father my grand father did ...

e.g. 2 the road that the enemy ...used to pass with... كان يفوت معاها ...

Finally, an important point is to be raised: the EFL students uses translation from the three languages he has learned whatever the language of writing, yet the frequency of use of translation depends on his proficiency level in each language.

FREQUENCY OF USE OF TRANSLATION

Translation was frequently used as a cognitive strategy in writing in the three languages. Out of a total of 8 cognitive strategies identified in this study, translation accounted for 30.76% of all cognitive strategy uses in Arabic, 35% in French and 29.03% in English. Then, if we look at the number of subject students who used this strategy in each language, we obtain the following figures.

	N.E. ARABIC		N.E. FRENCH		N.E. ENGLISH	
	A.F. n/16	R.F. n%/100%	A.F. n/16	R.F. n%/100%	A.F. n/16	R.F. n%/100%
Frequency of students using Translation	04	25.00 %	07	43.75 %	09	56.25 %

Table 1: Frequency of use of translation by the sixteen experimental students in the three narrative essays

Translation was used by students in the three languages, but it was more used in English and less used in Arabic. The reason for this difference in the frequency of use was revealed by the qualitative analysis of data. We found that it was more difficult for students to write in the foreign languages than in their L1, and since this strategy helped them to produce words or sentences and overcome their writing difficulties, it was more frequently used in English and French.

Then we tried to find out the frequency of use of translation in the three languages at each year of study.

	1 st year			2 nd year			3 rd year			4 th year		
	NE AR n/4	NE FR n/4	NE EN n/4	NE AR n/4	NE FR n/4	NE EN n/4	NE AR n/4	NE FR n/4	NE EN n/4	NE AR n/4	NE FR n/4	NE EN n/4
Number of students using Translation	1	3	4		2	1	2	1	3	1	1	1

Table 2: Frequency of use of translation at each level of instruction in the three narrative essays

The highest number of students using translation was that of 1st year students and the lowest one was recorded at the level of 4th year students. We notice that the use of translation in the FLs and mainly in English correlates negatively with students' year of study. This leads to state that the more students become proficient in a FL the less language production difficulty they face and therefore the less translation they use.

On the whole, translation is used as a problem-solving technique and appears to play an important facilitative role in EFL students' writing process. Moreover, it seems to be unavoidable since it is used, though not with the same frequency, in the three languages.

THE ROLE OF TRANSLATION IN STUDENTS' WRITING

With respect to students' shared beliefs about using translation in writing, they generally expressed the inevitability of translation use in the foreign languages namely in English at their present phase of learning, and considered translation as a positive learning resource for them not only in writing but in learning in general as it allowed them to comprehend, memorize, and produce the TL, to acquire language skills, and to complete various tasks in the TL.

In effect, the present study showed that students used translation strategy frequently to solve their writing problems when not finding the appropriate word or how to express an idea namely in French and English writing. They, most of the time, succeeded to convey the

meaning they wanted thanks to this strategy. It was also noted that such strategy use lessens when writers acquire more language proficiency as they face less writing difficulty. This was observed with 4th year students.

However, the results of the qualitative analysis of the present data revealed that translation could be a double edged weapon, either a facilitating or a debilitating strategy depending on its use. When this strategy was used moderately, it facilitated students writing by giving them the opportunity to overcome the language obstacle. However, when overused it was time consuming, it hindered writing and it resulted in fragmentary and unstylish compositions. The reason was that when the student focused on translating all his sentences while writing, he could not keep in mind the essay question and went astray. Friedlander (1990: 110) explains the dangers of overusing translation:

If ESL writers retrieve information about a writing topic from memory in their first language then have to translate into English before writing anything down, this act of translation can lead to an overload of their short-term memory and a diminishment in the quality of the content of their writing.

In addition to the above mentioned danger, translation may present another negative effect, that of using a word-for word translation which does not necessarily result in adequate and acceptable utterances. In effect, many students fell in the pitfall of word-for word translation leading them to produce erroneous or meaningless sentences.

CONCLUSION

The results of the present study indicate that translation can serve as a problem-solving technique in writing. It helped students to develop their thoughts and ideas, to find out their words and to express themselves. This is why many researchers and educationalists encourage the use of translation in language learning claiming that mother tongue is a very rich source of linguistic knowledge with which any L2/FL learner is already equipped, and it does not seem reasonable to deprive learners

from using this recourse at the expense of exercising an English-only atmosphere in the classroom.

However students should be warned to use translation with caution since it presents some disadvantages. As revealed by this study a word-for-word translation is not always successful. Learners should be beware about the structural differences existing between languages which may cause negative interference from their L1. In other words, learners should be warned that there is not always a structural correspondence between their first language and the language they are learning. Then teachers will give insights to students into how to use translation effectively by raising their awareness to L1 and L2/FL difference and conflict on a syntactic, semantic and stylistic level. Namely as learners, in particular those who are advanced, are often keen to know the underlying rule behind a particular foreign language, and tend to ask the question how an expression is translated in the foreign language and what rules are involved. In addition, learners will have to avoid overuse of translation as this proved to affect negatively the overall content of students' essays. Teachers will, then, guide them to use moderately this strategy and explain that there are other strategies that can be used to solve their language production problems such as circumlocution or use of the opposite to avoid falling in the pitfall of translating all their ideas and sentences and producing meaningless writings.

To conclude, Teachers may not need to prohibit students' use of translation altogether as there are instances when translation can be beneficial to students during the development of their L2/FL system. Yet, it is important that teachers raise their learners' awareness about the advantages and disadvantages of translation so that they can use it effectively and explain that translation is not conceived of as an end in itself, but rather as a problem solving technique and as a means of developing their language competence.

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