

Iranian EFL learners' Perception of the Use of L1 to L2 Translation Task in General English Classes

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Abstract-The use of first language in learning a second language has always been a controversial issue in language methodology. While some foreign language teachers may think of translation as a critical means to ensure students' comprehension and a very significant writing exercise (Atkinson, 1987), other researchers (e.g., Harbord, 1992; Gorsuch, 1998) may totally forbid or discourage the use of the students' native language and translation in the classroom. Despite such controversies, it is not yet known whether Iranian learners have negative or positive beliefs about the use of L1 to L2 translation tasks in their English learning. In doing so, 200 participants were selected through convenience sampling and divided into two groups of pre-and upper intermediate. Two instruments were used to collect the data. Inferential and statistical statistics techniques were used to analyze the data. The results of data analysis indicate that the participants of the study believe that they use translation tasks to learn all language skills. The results also indicated that there was significant difference between pre and upper intermediate language learners' scores on their beliefs about translation and translation use.

Key words- L1; L2; translation; learners' perception

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of English teaching methods (e. g., Howatt, 1984) has shown that the idea of using L1 in the L2 classroom was popular during the era of the Grammar Translation Method. However, as Howatt says, immediately following the First World War, Grammar Translation Method was strongly objected. Since then, all the other accepted English language teaching methods including the recently popular Communicative Language Teaching have tried to dissuade the use of L1 in L2 classrooms (Cole, 1998; Cook, 1999; Cook, 2001 a, 2001 b). This view of learner's L1 avoidance has also been reflected in most of modern L2 teaching materials (Atkinson, 1987; Buckmaster, 2002) while other researchers (e.g., Harbord) may totally forbid or discourage the use of the students' native language and translation in the classroom. Although it is still used throughout the world, no theoretically and practically valid teaching methodology which supports it exists (Richards & Rodgers, 1986), and many applied linguists and educators speak out against it.

More specifically from the turn of the twentieth century onwards, quite many theoretical works and practical methods in language teaching have recommended that a second language (L2) be taught without reference to the learners' first language (L1). It has become a common

belief among teachers that the translation of L1 makes barriers in the acquisition of L2 (Liao, 2002). For instance, based on the principles underlying the later-developed Direct Method and Audio-Lingual Method, translation was banned and was no longer considered as a part of classroom activities (Zhang & Wu, 2008, 2011 b). Despite the almost undisputed acceptance of the monolingual orthodoxy to ESL/EFL teaching, recent years have witnessed a considerable shift of views among the ELT professionals concerning the utility of students' mother tongue in the L2 classroom arguing that classroom use of the learners' native language has certain advantages in some ways (Cole, 1998).

Those who support the use of L1 in the L2 classroom claim that some times it is appropriate to use L1 in L2 classroom. Atkinson (1987) has been a pioneer in the constructive use of L1. He contends that the role of using mother tongue, as a classroom activity, is so great that it deserves considerable attention and discussion from scholars to develop a 'Post-communicative Approach' to TEFL for adolescents and adults (Zhang, Wu, Wei, & Wang, 2011). Atkinson agrees with a limited L1 use in the L2 classroom and offers three reasons for that: as a learner preferred strategy, as a humanistic approach, and as an efficient use of time. There are several good psychological reasons for allowing L1 use in the EFL/ESL classroom. For example, Hopkins (1988) holds that if a learner of a second language is banned to use

his/her native language, he/she might feel that his/her identity is threatened. Echevarria and Grave (1998), on their part, point out that when students' native language is welcomed in the classroom, they feel that their language is respected and valued. As there have been many theoretical arguments both for and against the use of L1 in the L2 classroom, teachers and students need to be aware of the why, when and how much of L1 to be used in the classroom. Otherwise, the imprudent use of L1 could have long lasting negative effects on learners' production of the target language.

The use of L1 in L2 classrooms has always been of much concern to applied linguistics in general and language teachers in particular (Gorjian, Pazhakh, & Naghizadeh, 2012). Despite the great diversity in the findings of the same studies, no one has ever tried to study Iranian EFL learners' particular beliefs about translation and their frequent use of translation as a learning strategy in their general English courses. That is, it is not yet known whether they agree with the use of L1 to L2 translation tasks in their general English courses or not. Moreover, it is not known how often Iranian learners' make use of L1 to L2 translation tasks. More specifically, the study tries to seek answers to the following questions:

1. Does the use of L1 to L2 translation tasks in EFL classrooms have any significant impacts on the pre-intermediate EFL learners' speaking fluency?
2. Does the use of L1 to L2 translation tasks in EFL classrooms have any significant impacts on intermediate EFL learners' speaking fluency?

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Studying the history of L1 use in the L2 classroom indicates that the views about L1 have always been changing (Auerbach, 1999). Many years ago, when the students were learning through translation, bilingual teaching was the 'norm'. The use of L1 to study L2 was almost universal and was accepted, mainly because the focus of language teaching was on the written word language than the spoken language. This trend slowly changed the direction (towards a monolingual approach), in the 19th century, perhaps because the focus of teaching and learning shifted toward the spoken language. Monolingual Approach became popular by the influence of great mass migration, colonialism and a large increase in research in the field in the 20th century (Gorjian, Alipour, & Saffarian, 2011).

For the purpose of evolving the monolingual tenet, the experiences of teachers who went abroad during the colonial teaching period (Phillipson, 1992), and British colonial and neo-colonial policies would help (Hawks, 2001). Since English became the most important culture in the British colonies, those who were not a part of it, were forced to accept it if they wished to have a better life or be a part of the ruling elite. Those who moved to America were also forced to accept the rules of that society, if they wished to make a life for themselves in the new country. This caused English to be superior to all other languages, and eventually a lot of people accepted

the assumption that English was the only language that should be spoken in the English-language classroom. They have labeled this rapid spread and influence of English, both in English speaking countries and overseas, The Linguistic Imperialism (Phillipson, 1992).

Stern (1992) reminds us that even in classes which are different linguistically, it is possible to make use of cross-lingual technique. He notes that the range could be more limited and the situation may not be as easy as in the case of the monolingual classes. Rinvoluceri (2001) demonstrated that the use of L1 also depends on whether the teacher speaks the students' language or not, and whether the classroom is monolingual or multilingual. Rinvoluceri designed activities to contain these situations (Zhang, Wang, Wu & Huo, 2011). Echevarria and Grave (1998) also remind us even when the teacher does not speak the students' languages there are a number of ways for a teacher to incorporate students' native language into the classroom. The teacher could let students assist or guide each other, the teacher him/her self could ask other students or colleagues for help with the use of bilingual dictionaries. In sum the idea that L1 can help the student psychologically is approved by the fact that learners actually learn more when they feel more secure, and when they are more comfortable in a learning environment.

3. METHOD

3.1. Participants

A total of 200 students (eight classes) enrolled in a four - year junior college in Ahvaz Chamran and Medical universities were selected to participate in this study for the quantitative survey. In order to conduct this study on the students who were equivalent to a tertiary education level, the target populations of this study were chosen from the students who passed or were general English courses during the last academic terms. Participants were selected from different majors such as Persian literature, Chemistry, mechanical engineering, Biology, and nursing.

3.2. Instruments

The instruments used in this study included three questionnaires two of which were adapted from Liao (2006) and validated by the researcher of this study. The first instrument, the *Inventory for Beliefs about the use of L1 to L2 Translation (IBT)* was used for beliefs measurement. The original instrument consisted of 24 items measured on a five-point Likert scale. The construct validity of the instrument was estimated through exploratory factor analysis. Factor analysis reduced the items into 23 and categorized them into three factors (variables). Cronbach alpha was also used to estimate internal consistency and the obtained alpha was .76.

For strategy use measurement, the *Inventory for Translation as a Learning Strategy (ITLS)* was used. It consisted of 28 items measured on a five-point-Likert

scale. Construct validity of this scale was also estimated through factor analysis. On the basis of the results of the factor analysis the items were reduced into five factors (See results section). Internal consistency was also estimated through Cronbach Alpha. The alpha was .95 which seems to an ideal consistency index.

The third instrument was a general language proficiency test which was adapted from Longman Sample TOEFL test. It consisted of 80 multiple choice items delineating learners' grammar, reading and vocabulary knowledge. KR-21 approach was applied to estimate the reliability of this instrument. The reliability index was .80 which seems to be acceptable.

3.3. Data Collection

The researcher went to each class to administer the survey at a prearranged time. He first briefly explained to the participants the nature and the purpose of this study and provided instructions about how to answer the questionnaires. The returned questionnaires were coded and entered into SPSS version 11.5. Whenever, needed the data were transformed into interval data. Finally, the data were analyzed through appropriate statistical techniques.

3.4. Data Analysis

The analysis of the questionnaires will be conducted by using the SPSS and the SAS System through the following statistical methods: (1) Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, means, and standard deviations were computed to summarize the participants' responses to the IBT, and ITLS. These descriptive analyses could help identify the overall patterns of students' beliefs about translation and their learning strategy use involving translation in order to address the first and the second research questions; (2) Factor analysis was used to determine the underlying factors that might account for the main sources of variation among the individuals' responses to both the IBT and the ITLS; (3) Two independent sample t-tests were run to compare the mean scores of pre intermediate and upper immediate students on beliefs about translation and their use of translation strategies. Two different one-sample t-tests were also run to compare the means of sample on the two instruments with those of populations; and (4) Cronbach Alpha and KR-21 approach was also used to estimate the reliability and consistency of the instruments.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Construct Validation of IBT

At first the adapted inventory was translated into Persian and administered to 200 participants. Exploratory factor analysis, principal component with Varimax rotation, was used to determine the underlying factors that may account for the main sources of variation among the individuals' responses to IBT and ITLS. The internal consistency of the two instruments was also determined through Cronbach alpha.

Results of factor analysis in the above table show that item 8 was deleted due to loading factor of less than .4. Items 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 17, 18, 18, and 20 constitute the first factor which is described as "Beliefs about positive effects of translation on learners' affective and meta-cognitive aspects of English learning". The initial Eigenvalue of this factor is 5.8 and it explains about 24.5 percent of the total variance. The second factor consists of items 15, 16, 21, and 24. It is described as "Beliefs about positive effects of translation on enhancing learners' English skills and classroom interaction". The initial Eigenvalue of this factor is 2 and it explains about 8 percent of the total variance. The third factor consists of items 22 and 23, and it is described as "Beliefs about negative effects of translation in learning English". The initial Eigenvalue of this factor is 1.8 and it explains about 7 percent of the total variance.

4.2. Descriptive Analysis of IBT

Participants responded to the IBT items on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, indicating the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with statements concerning their beliefs about translation. The means and standard deviations were computed on the participants' responses to the items and are presented in Table 1. Most of these participants endorsed the concept that translation played a positive role in their current English learning experiences. Among the 24 choice items, 16 items (items 1, 24, 9, 4, 6, 14, 11, 7, 13, 12, 2, 5, 3, 10, 19, 21, 17) had the highest means ($M > 3.5$) and thus were the most common beliefs held by the participants, whereas 4 items (items 23, 16, 15, and 20) received relatively low means ($M < 3$) and became the least common beliefs. And the items (17, 18, and 22) had the means between 3 and 3.5 which are labeled as common beliefs. Generally speaking, the beliefs about translation can be rank ordered as: most common, common, and least common beliefs.

In order to see whether there was a significant difference between the mean score of the population and sample, a one-sample t-test was run. The results show there was a significant difference between the mean of the sample and that of population of almost all items ($\text{sig.} = 0.000$, $p = .01$). That is, all the participants made use of translation strategies.

A couple of researchers (e.g., Harbord, 1992; Gorsuch, 1998; Cook, 2001b) strongly rejected the use of translation in L2 classrooms. Unlike these researchers, the results of the present study showed that students most frequently use translation to learn English vocabulary words, idioms, phrases, and grammar, to read, write, and speak English, and to check their reading and listening comprehension. These findings were somewhat inconsistent with Kobayashi and Rinnert's study (1992) in that they found that 77% of Japanese university students in their research reported preferring direct composition in English to translation, because they wanted to think in English. Huang and Tzeng (2000) also reported that only 11% of their high English proficiency participants in Taiwan used translation as a strategy to improve reading skills. Such a difference of the amount of translation strategy use might be due to the fact that the

participants in this study, as college students in Khuzestan province, tended to be less proficient in their English level and relied more on translating. However, the findings of the present study were consistent of Liao (2006) in that he found that Taiwanese students tended to make use of translation strategy in learning all language skills. This difference of the amount of translation strategy use might be due to the fact that the participants in this study, as junior college

students in central Taiwan, tended to be less proficient in their English level and relied more on translating. Students with the scores of between 50 and 65 were labeled upper-intermediate. Their scores on the IBT items were added and transformed. Then, the two groups' means were compared through an independent sample t-test. The results are shown in the following Table.

Table 1. T-test for means on IBT and IELTS

Tests		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Ibt	Equal variances assumed	.016	.899	-.78	149	.434
	Equal variances not assumed			.78	148	.434
Itls	Equal variances assumed	.429	.514	-.69	150	.491
	Equal variances not assumed			-.69	149.6	.491

As the results in the above table show, there is no significant difference between the two groups' scores on IBT items ($t = -.78$, $df = 149$, $sig = .434$). That is, proficiency level does not affect learners' beliefs about the use of translation. The results also show that there was no significant difference between the mean scores of pre and upper intermediate learners' mean scores on ITLS ($t = -.69$, $df = 150$, $sig = .49$). With regard to the English proficiency level, this study did not find a statistically significant relationship. Although previous studies have revealed that less proficient English learners preferred to translate while reading English, relied more on translation during English learning (Wen & Johnson 1997), or benefited more from translation than more proficient learners (Kobayashi & Rinnert 1992), English proficiency did not make a significant difference in translation beliefs and strategy use in the quantitative analysis of the present study. The results were consistent with the findings of Liao (2006) in that he found that the variable of language proficiency did not influence the less and more proficient learners' beliefs of the use of translation tasks on both IBT and IELTS.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of the data analysis show that the participants of the study believed that the use of translation tasks can help them improve their language skills. They believed that translation help them to understand reading and speaking. They believed that translation helped them understand vocabulary, idioms, and expressions. They also believed that translation help them understand grammar rules, and teachers' instructions (Gorjian, Pazhakh & Parang, 2012). They do not believe that translation diminishes the amount of English input they receive. They do not agree that the use of Persian translation may interfere with my ability to learn English well. The participants most frequently used translation to

learn English vocabulary words, idioms, phrases, and grammar, to read, write, and speak English, and to check their reading and listening comprehension. Proficiency level does not influence the beliefs of the participants about the use of translation tasks in English classroom. Both pre and upper-intermediate language learners make use of translation tasks to improve language learning.

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