

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM IN ENGLISH AND PERSIAN TRANSLATION CLASS

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Abstract

Teaching English and Persian translation is still dominantly based on a transmissionist approach where the teacher at the center of the class functions as a *conduit* for transmitting knowledge from the outside world to translator trainees – a metaphor used by Kiraly (2000). The unsuccessful results of English and Persian translation programs in Iran may originate from a number of sources such as the syllabus in use, trainees' motivations and teaching approach among others. The present study is based on a quasi-experimental design to test the effect of customary English and Persian translation teaching while controlling a number of other influencing variables. Pearson's Product Moment and Paired t-Test statistical procedures are used in analysis of the quantitative data. The result is congruent with some earlier qualitative research which recommends more tendencies to constructivist approaches in teaching English and Persian translation.

Keywords: English-Persian translation, social constructivism, quasi-experimental design

1. INTRODUCTION

Until recently educating translators has not received the attention it truly deserves, and students in translation programs have been receiving unsystematic training based on trial-and-error methods (Aula int, 2005). With regard to the increasing number of programs educating trainee translators, Pym (2005, par. 1) seems to criticize the current practice, stating that “more people than ever are being trained as translators. So more people than ever think they know how to train translators. Or do they?” In Iran too, scholars have pointed out flaws in how the teaching of translation is being practiced in the translation class (Azimi & Nabizadeh, 2009; Khazaefar, 1999; Khazaefar & Khoshsaligheh, 2010; Mirza Ebrahim Tehrani, 2003).

Kiraly (2001) describes a challenging deficiency with the present state of training translators:

While contemporary translation theory has for years been moving away from conceptualizations of translation as a process of transferring meaning from one text to

another, and toward the perspective that readers (and translators) *make* meaning as they interact with texts, transmissionist approaches to the training of translators still seem to predominate in many European training institutions. In the field of education, *transmission* describes an approach to teaching and learning where knowledge is seen as being transmitted from the instructor to the learner. (p. 50)

Nonetheless, following Rosas (2004), it is fair to state that in *A Social Constructivist Approach to Translator Education. Empowerment from Theory to Practice*, Kiraly (2000) has filled a critical gap in translator education methodology and initiated a scholarly attention to translation didactics.

However, any novelty approach in teaching translation skills may not instantly find its way to translation classrooms – the same fate as that of progressive methods in language teaching which, despite being widely accepted as effective in scholarly communities are not being ‘practically’ implemented in language classes by teachers even though the school syllabus and the course books are designed based on such methods.

This study is based on the belief that Vygotsky’s theory of learning applied by Kiraly (2000) to teaching translation is more effective than traditional ways which are mainly based on “transmitting” knowledge and skills on how to translate in teacher-centered classes. Accordingly, the study is designed to empirically test the effectiveness of Kiraly’s approach when implemented by translation teachers in comparison to the common traditional approach in (to be on the safe side, most) English and Persian translation classes in Iran.

2. SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH

Kiraly (2000, pp. 34-50) illustrates the key principles of his social constructivist approach to translator education and empowerment. What follows is a brief synopsis of what he finds pivotal.

Multiple Perspectives: Following other advocates of social constructivism, Kiraly (2000, p. 34) explains that while accepting the existence of a real and external world, individual can merely understand and perceive the world through their very own personal perspectives. The individual is not alone, and they learn to communicate with others, and here it is when they learn to think, by sharing and contrasting perspectives with other individuals. Lakoff (1987, p. 261) maintains that we are not outside the reality, but are part of it, in it. It is impossible for us to step outside of it and take a heavenly point of view as an external observer.

Collaborative Learning: Internalization is an individual and constructive process rather than an automatic reflection of external events. Learning happens when the internal and external processes take place simultaneously. Peers and the teacher working collaboratively are therefore simultaneously creating meaning among them and are at the same time internalizing meanings individually (Newman, Griffin, & Cole, 1989).

Appropriation: The concept of appropriation denotes that learning entails the internalization of socio-cultural knowledge, which is also the process in which the interpersonal knowledge becomes intrapersonal knowledge. Appropriation suggests that learning is an (inter)active, constructive process and not a transfer of knowledge. To him learning can only make sense when it is couched in its reasonable situation (Kiraly, 2000, p. 39).

Zone of Proximal Learning: For many people Vygotsky’s socio-historical theory of development is best associated with his concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Vygotsky’s theory maintains that the child follows the adult’s example and gradually develops the ability to do certain tasks without help or assistance. He called the difference between what a child can do with help and what they can do without guidance the zone of proximal development.

Vygotsky (1994, p. 57) summarizes that developmental process and learning process do not take place simultaneously; yet the developmental process lags behind the learning process. Such a sequence leads to the zone of proximal learning. An individual's ZPD is constantly changing as the individual masters challenging tasks through time and requires less or no assistance with tasks that the individual used to need help for accomplishing them.

Situated Learning: One central notion to constructivism is learning by means of authentic actions. Varney (2009, p. 31) states that the emphasis on situatedness in learning indicates a more general move in linguistic and cultural studies which argues that identity is formed by participation in particular discourse communities. Kiraly (2000) in this regard explains that it is best that skills of translating be acquired through collaborative undertaking of professional translation tasks with all of their challenges and sophistications under supervision.

Viability: To Kiraly (2000, p. 44), viability suggests that the construction of the real world created in the mind is maintained as long as it works for the individual. The individual's perplexed and changed perception of environment may lead to individual's altered mental constructions and therefore further appropriation.

Scaffolding: The support offered by the teacher to assist learners in the collaborative construction of their mental models is what Kiraly (2000) refers to as scaffolding. In social constructivism, it is a pivotal concept as it stresses the understanding that the constructivist teacher does not simply give the students a task to complete by themselves but provides the needed support as long as it is required. Scaffolding in Kiraly's (p. 46) opinion can take a variety of forms such as providing hints to the exemplary completion of an entire task, but as the scaffolds become dispensable, they are gradually taken away in order that the learner can go through the task either on his own or in peers.

Sociocognitive Apprenticeship: Scaffolding leads to the technique of cognitive apprenticeship which is a process that learners are acculturated into authentic practice through activity and social interaction. The learning autonomy is reliant on the development of the ability to assess one's own performance and compare it with that of professionals. The success of sociocognitive apprenticeship hinges on this skill to screen one's progress to mastery and make the decisions without external guidance (Kiraly, 2000, pp. 47-49).

3. METHOD

The present study adopted a quantitative method to test the effectiveness of the Social Constructivist Approach to teaching translation in comparison with the common approach of teaching translation in Iran which is based on transmission of knowledge. The study employs a quasi-experimental design which includes a pretest and a posttest and a treatment on one of the groups as the experimental group with the other functioning as the control.

3.1 Participation

Since a sample of at least fifteen subjects in each group is advised for such a research (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 99), the participation of thirty Iranian, twenty to twenty-two year old, male and female students is benefited in the study. The participants are undergoing a BA program in English-Persian translation in Iran. The students have successfully passed the course *Translation of Journalistic Texts I*, and are registered to take the course *Translation of Journalistic Texts II* which is offered in two classes taught by the same teacher. The courses mentioned are two of the compulsory ones that all English translation students ought to take before graduation. The first is

a prerequisite to take the second, which means they cannot be taken the other way round or simultaneously. All the students in both classes have taken the former course with the same teacher in the past semester.

As literature on statistical analysis offers, a legitimate research design is *matched pairs design*. One of the instances that Hatch and Farhady (1982, p. 115) recommend such paired data is when you cannot or do not rely on random selection as a means of matching the groups to start with; in such a case matched pairs of participants can be selected based on a related variable that the two of them have in common (i.e. language proficiency score), and then one of the two groups of participants will be assigned to the control and the other participant to the treatment group. As such, in order to have two comparable groups of students, according to the final grade of students in their *Translation of Journalistic Texts I*, a pair of students who both received the same grade (i.e. 17 out of 20) is determined. One of the two is then in the control group and the other in the experimental group. So eventually after choosing fifteen of such pairs, there are two groups comprising fifteen students, each group in one class. This provided the experiment two similar groups in terms of the size of the group and the initial translation quality of the participants, and accordingly, the two groups have exactly the same mean, median and mode.

3.2 Instrumentation

As for the pretest, the results of the final assessment of *Translation of Journalistic Texts I* was used as the pretest to capture the initial differences of the subjects and as the basis for assigning thirty of the students to fifteen matched pairs.

As for the posttest, to assess the eventual translation quality of the students, a translation production test was used consisting of a newspaper article with approximately four hundred words in English that was instructed to be translated into Persian (Farsi) by the students at the end of the course as the final exam which consisted half of the total grade of the students. However, to objectify the fairly subjective results from the translation production test, the translated texts were rated by two examiners, and the mean score from the first and second raters who are both teachers of translation courses was considered as the overall result for every participant for the purpose of the final comparison. The statistically significant difference between the results in the posttests will show whether the treatment has had a positive or negative or no effects on the performance of the students. The pretest only served the purpose of choosing two similar and comparable groups of students, one in every class to furnish a control and an experimental group.

3.3 Procedure

The procedure for collection of the data for the study entails applying a treatment on the experimental group and comparing the results with those of the control group which is described below. The 15th edition of SPSS statistical package also was used in the data analysis procedure.

3.3.1 Treatment

The study was aiming at comparing the long-held transmissionist approach with the social constructivist approach to translator education proposed by Kiraly (2000), in one full semester. So, one of the classes was taught according to the traditionally common method of running translation courses as the control group. In the control group, the class is centered on the teacher who offers or chooses the 'correct' translation. The other group as the experimental group was

taught according to the principles and pedagogical implications introduced in Kiraly's *A social constructivist approach to translator education, Empowerment from theory to practice*. Unlike the control group, the students in the treatment class have the chance of bringing translation work from the real world as long as they are germane to the class focus, and the students only work in groups. In contrast to the responsibility of the teacher in the control group to provide all the answers and the 'correct' translation, the role of the teacher is not a conduit to transmit the truth to the whole class individually, but the teacher as a specialist support, provides help and expertise particularly when needed by the groups as long as assistance is needed. Sharing is an important concept as in social constructivism learning and development is constructed in the minds of the students through social, meaningful interactions. The teacher in such a class is not someone who knows and reflects the truth from outside, but one who assists the students to construct their own understanding of the subject matter as part of the real world.

3.3.2 Assessment

To assess the quality of the translation of the students, at the end of the term they were asked to sit for the translation production test as the posttest of the study. It was administered for both classes concurrently in a ninety-minute session. To objectify the fairly subjective assessment of the raters, every student's translation was rated by their teacher and another independent rater who is also a university lecturer of translation, and the mean of the two scores was considered as the final score of every participant.

The employed translation quality assessment system which is designed, validated and applied by Waddington (2001, p. 314), is based on error analysis and aims to take into account the negative effect of errors on the overall quality of the translations. The rater first has to determine whether each mistake is a translation mistake or just a language mistake; this is done by deciding whether the mistake affects the meaning from the source text in the target text. If it does not, it is considered a language error which is penalized with -1 point; if it does, it is seen as a translation error and is penalized with -2 points. However, in the case of translation errors, the rater ought to judge the significance of the negative effect that each one of these errors has on the translation, considering the objective and the readership specified in the instructions to the candidates in the exam paper. In order to judge this importance, the rater has the table below to refer to.

Table 1: Typology of errors in Waddington's TQA

Negative effect on words in ST	Penalty for negative effect
On: 1-5 words	2
6-20 words	3
21-40 words	4
41-60 words	5
61-80 words	6
81-100 words	7
100+ words	8
The whole text	12

To calculate the final score, the examiner fixes a number of positive points like one hundred and then subtracts the total number of negative points from that. Finally the examiner divides the result by a number so that the final total score required out of which can be obtained. According to the typical Iranian grading system, the grading is out of twenty and as such the final score

achieved with the initial one hundred positive points after the subtraction was divided by five, and in case of coming up with fractions they were rounded up to the next half or whole score.

3.3.3 Limitations

There are certain aspects of this study that are prone to limit the generalizability of the findings of this research. One of the main limitations of the study lies in the fact that the results of the pretest (from the earlier term) are not necessarily reliable and objectified since they are based on the subjective evaluation of the sole teacher (though the same teacher) of the courses which poses reasonable threat to the external consistency of the study and in turn the generalizability of the findings. Naturally in this case, the researchers may not make too confident claims in the conclusion. The other limitation which is a natural disposition of most linguistic studies with experimental designs involved with human subjects is the small scale of the statistical sample in addition to practical restrictions of this particular study that remind of caution in interpreting the findings and implications of the study.

4. RESULTS

To begin with, as it was mentioned earlier, to form the two comparable groups needed for the study, final results of *Translation of Journalistic Texts I* class were used to select the subjects of the study. Fifteen pairs of students were selected, and every pair included a student from class A and the other from class B. As can be seen in Table 2, six of the student pairs had 14, four had 15, two had 16, and 3 had 17 out of 20 in their *Translation of Journalistic Texts I*.

Table 2 Pretest Results Used for Subject Selection

Pretest Grade	Frequency	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
14	6	40.0	40.0
15	4	26.7	66.7
16	2	13.3	80.0
17	3	20.0	100.0
Total	15	100.0	

Such a selection contributed to formation of two groups with exactly the same descriptive statistics in terms of their members' results (Table 3). During the term, the two groups were exposed to different instructional treatments. One group experienced the traditionally customary teaching approach in most English and Persian translation classrooms in Iranian school as they were taught in the last term. While the other group was taught according to the guidelines and principles of Kiraly's (2000) Social Constructivist Approach for teaching translation.

Table 3 Descriptive Statistics of the Groups' Pretest Results

Mean	Median	Mode	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
15.13	15	14	1.19	14	17

After the posttest results (final exams grades in *Translation of Journalistic Texts II*) were obtained, an analysis was done to compute the inter-rater reliability for the results from the translation production test used to assess the student's quality of translation. Therefore, the Pearson's Product Moment formula was applied. As seen in Table 4, the coefficient calculated (0.82) proved that there is a significant correlation which illustrates that the translation production test could be a reliable estimation of the students translation ability.

Table 4 Inter-rater Reliability for the Scores of the Posttest

Raters	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	Correlations
Corrector A	15.93	1.14	30	0.82**
Corrector B	16.10	1.08	30	

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level.

Knowing that the test was a reliable estimation of the students’ translating performance, the means of the two classes were calculated as seen in Table 5, showing that there is a difference between the two groups (Control Mean=15.28, Experimental Mean=16.75), and apparently the treatment has contributed to a higher mean score, indicating a better quality of translation achieved (Table 5).

Table 5 Descriptive Statistics of the Paired Samples’ Posttest Results

Paired Groups	N	Range	Mean	Std. Deviation
Control Group’s Posttest Mean	15	2.50	15.28	0.68
Experimental Group’s Posttest Mean	15	3.00	16.75	0.85

Eventually, a paired samples *t*-test was conducted to evaluate whether the intervention has had a significant impact on students’ performance scores. The *t*-test results as in Table 6 indicated that there was statistically significant improvement in the scores of the treatment group (M=16.75, SD= 0.85) in comparison with those of the control group (M=15.28, SD= 0.68) with $t(14) = -7.09$, $p=0.000$. As such, it provides reasons to believe that the treatment, application of Kiraly’s (2000) proposed Approach of Social Constructivism, has positively resulted in the improvement of the trainee translators’ performance.

Table 6 Paired Samples *t*-Test Results

Pair	Control Group’s Posttest Mean - Experimental Group’s Posttest Mean	Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower				Upper
1	-1.46667	.80104	.20683	-1.91027	-1.02306	-7.091	14	.000	

5. CONCLUSION

The results of this quantitative study tend to recommend the application of the social constructivism in translator education for the improvement of the translation quality of the students. Considering the limitations of any quasiexperimental study in general and those of this study in specific no generalization or strong claims can be made; nevertheless, the outcome of this study is congruent with the findings of the qualitative action research studies by Kiraly (2001) and Varney (2009) which recommend that adopting a social constructivist approach to translator training is a more effective approach in contrast to other more traditional, de-contextualized translation skill teaching methods which assume an objective notion of knowledge that can be transmitted through the teacher as the conduit, centered at the middle of the class away and above the learners. As Fenwick (2000) contends constructivism by and large portrays learners as independent constructors of their own knowledge, with varying capacity or confidence to rely on their own constructions, yet all views share one central premise: a learner is believed to construct, through reflection, a personal understanding of pertinent structures of meaning derived from their

action in the real world. So, even aside from the supporting results of the study, every translator educator through their everyday observational research in the translation class would confirm that an educational approach based on constructivism is a preferred option when it comes to the fact that any of the learners as prospective professional translators would most need to acquire skills of independent problem-solving and responsibility for self-improvement and selfassessment to qualify to maintain a profession in the field of translation or interpreting – all the qualities that are highly regarded and focused on in a constructivist approach to teaching translation.

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