

Title

Is Reading Mistreated in a Translation Class?

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Abstract

Reading is the initial act and the essential part of any L2 to L1 translation bustle. In spite of its importance, it has not received due attention it deserves for much attention has been paid to the act of translation at the cost of developing necessary reading skills. This study attempts to examine this effect through comparing the Iranian EFL Journal 428

reading time of two groups of undergraduate students who study in two different departments, i.e., English language and literature and translation departments. Using a TOEFL reading text, this paper has found a significant difference in the reading speed of the two groups. As the results show, Literature students have done much better than Translation students in terms of reading speed. In addition, we have scrutinized those aspects de rigueur of reading comprehension from the cognitive perspective and suggested ways of enhancing reading comprehension in translation classes.

Keywords: Reading speed, Reading comprehension, Translation, English Literature, Cognitive Psychology

1. Introduction

To a reader who is fairly cognizant of the nature of translation and its required underlying skills, it sounds axiomatic that translation has some shared areas with other important language skills, notably reading comprehension. But surprisingly enough, reading, as Mitchell (1995, p:95) rightly argues, is only rarely mentioned in books on translation theory. It nearly requires little comment that to be able to translate is to be able to read (Steiner, 1975, p: 189; Simpson, 1975, p:257; Picken, 1983, p:282; Wills, 1982, p:87; Bell, 1987, p:407; Hatim and Mason, 1990, p:39). Reading comprehension seems to play a central role in

translation to the extent that without proper understanding of the text and the required encoding ability, translation, if viewed from the perspective of reception, would cease to operate. It is interesting to note that translation proper is a dual enterprise drawing upon both reception as well as production (Newmark, 1981, p:246; Edwards, 1992, p:202). In fact, it is the former ability that precedes the latter and functions as prerequisite for production. Hence, whatever is produced when a text is actually rendered depends fundamentally on correct reception of the text. This becomes more evident when translation begins from a foreign language to the first language.

In the face of the centrality of comprehension in translation, translation practice is thought to directly affect reading comprehension skills. To illustrate this effect, one needs to examine some principles upon which reading comprehension operates. I would tentatively begin with the important principles governing reading comprehension skills from the view point of cognitive psychology. The problem is that while reading comprehension is a heavenly gift to the practice of translation, the reward it receives is not often worth taking.

To the best knowledge of the present writer, this inappropriate trade-off has not so far Iranian EFL Journal

received a deserving attention. This will be explicated in the following discussion, which includes controlled vs. automatic processing, separating important from peripheral information, and guessing strategy vs. over-reliance on the dictionary.

2. Review of Literature

Reading is an important skill in Translation courses, because students have to read many texts and understand them fully in order to be able both to understand different theories and concepts around translation and also to translate efficiently. They need to be able to use adequate reading strategies and comprehend the texts fully. Reading is a complex cognitive activity of constructing meaning from a text in the shortest time possible in order to be able to communicate and of course to be able to translate. The purpose of reading is decoding a text

and comprehending it as fast as possible for which reader use a variety of strategies for guessing the unknown words and structures. So speed is an important factor in reading comprehension.

One of the other purposes of reading is automaticity, to the point where you just focus on meaning without paying attention to the structures of the sentences, which requires remarkable speed. It requires continuous practice, development and refinement. Of course some may argue that speed is not as important as accuracy in comprehending and retrieving the content (Austin, 2000), but as we all know reading is a social as well as cognitive process (Linda G. Fielding and P. David Pearson, 1994) and speed is a key factor in a world of globalization and competition, where in all of our daily activities we need to be fast enough to success. Although one may argue that translation students spent a lot of time on reading, decoding and translating texts, they do not learn reading skills and strategies, and so may foster wrong habits of reading. Previous studies have shown (Manning and Manning, 1984) that simply spending time on reading different text is not sufficient for improving reading skills. For acquiring reading skills and learning its strategies, one must be directly instructed by the teacher and must focus on these skills, in order to become a proficient reader and become motivated in reading and decoding texts (Fielding and Pearson, 1994).

In traditional translation classes in Iran, which continues to the present time, reading is not regarded as a skill, and is taken for granted. Students in these classes have to just read the text sentence by sentence, without even knowing about the subject of the text and its context.

They are not taught how to read text as efficiently as possible and in the shortest time

possible. They may also foster bad habits of reading, and may even miss some of the potential

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meanings of the words which are specific to particular contexts i.e. the possibility of multiple interpretations, as well as implications which are not explicitly stated in the text, conceptual

meaning, understanding relationship in the text structure and parts of a text through lexicalgrammatical cohesive devices and indicators in discourse because they only resort to

dictionary whenever they face an unfamiliar word and they have not been learnt to make assumptions about the possible meanings of the words in different contexts. So students must be taught and given time to practice comprehension strategies while reading texts for translation. As Pearson and Dole (1987) put it:

Explicit instruction, the name given to one such widely researched model, involves four phases: teacher modeling and explanation of a strategy, guided practice during which teachers gradually give students more responsibility for task completion, independent practice accompanied by feedback, and application of the strategy in real reading situations.

Motivation is also an important factor which affects reading skills. The very first requirement of translation is understanding the text itself at first hand, so whenever students face with difficulty in reading and understanding a text, they may become extremely demotivated to translate that text. If a student cannot read a text fluently and with a desirable speed, he may lose his motivation to read and to translate it. Students, who do not know how to decode and recognize words, cannot comprehend a text. Decoding doesn't mean just to check it in the dictionary, because some times words have special meanings in the contexts and cannot be found in dictionary definitions and if a student does not have advanced reading comprehension skills such as being able to guess the meaning according to the co-text and context, he will miss the appropriate meaning of it in translation. Students who have difficulty in decoding the meanings of words in a certain time, will not tend to interact with more difficult texts because of lack of motivation and often will dislike reading and of course translating. They will not develop sufficient language skills and strategies needed to become proficient readers. They cannot develop certain strategies to take advantage of structures and comprehension cues and so will resort to some extra tools such as dictionary for decoding the text. The type of instruction that they receive from their teachers will also affect their reading

comprehension. The teacher must directly teach the strategies for reading comprehension, but in translation classes, teachers do not do so, so the translation class is the slaughter site of reading. Simply providing opportunities for students to read texts will not help them acquire comprehension and speed learning strategies.

Their major objections for the use of translation in language teaching can be summarized as follow: first, it does not help students improve their communicative skills and was Iranian EFL Journal 431

detrimental both to fluency and language automaticity. Second it encourages the use of L1 in classroom instead of L2 and they do not learn to think in the language they have learnt. Third, translation may just be useful for learners with analytical and verbal-linguistic learning strategies. And finally because translation is an extremely slow, difficult, and laborious task which focuses on accuracy rather than fluency and may not be always rewarding. (<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/articles/translation-activitieslanguage-classroom,2009>, cited in G. Kavaliauskienė). Although these accusations may not be true for all the skills, but some of them are true about reading skill. For example, as this article supports, due to some cognitive factors and habits which are made up in the learners mind during translation courses, it can be detrimental to reading speed, automaticity, and fluency. The reasons are argued in the article in detail, but to point some, as we all know translation students have been used to translate every text sentence by sentence without taking a look at the whole and even without knowing about its topic. They just focus on the form of the sentences while translating a text, and whenever they face an unfamiliar word they simply check it in the dictionary. So when they read a text for different purposes other than translation, they will subconsciously focus on the form, they will also translate each word in their minds and these unconscious processes slow down the process of comprehension. Interestingly, although translation was not favored by English language practitioners, it existed with various degrees of legitimacy among other languages (Cook, 2007).

But in the recent century, as a result of social and political changes in the world and emerging of new directions in the study of language, the attention of theorists turned towards bilingual teaching and translation and they adopted a positive view of the merits of translation as an effective technique in language classes, and it again gained its significance and became a legitimate activity. Recent studies show that, at least in some circumstances, translation can be effective.

Cook (2010) an advocate of using translation in EFL classes maintains that it can help students learn better because it makes them focus on the forms of language and become aware of the new language's differences with their own thus it can be used as a communicative action in language classrooms and gives them an insight into how language works and enables them to use the language. He also refers to some evidence from psychology that elaborate processing needed to deal with translation, which can aid retention of memory and will make L2 structures more resistant to forgetting (Bialystok & Hummel, 1995. cited in Cook, 2010). Cook also argues that there is no evidence that translation Iranian EFL Journal 432

necessarily slows down language production. The following research questions are therefore proposed:

1. Do undergraduate students of English Language and literature read a reading text quicker than undergraduate students of Translation?
2. And if so, is there any significant difference in the reading speed of the two groups?
3. What are the main cognitive processes of reading as it stands and reading in a translation class?

3. Methodology

This study is a quasi-experimental design. The students were not selected on the basis of random selection, hence, we make no claim on the generalizability of the findings.

Participants

Two groups of EFL students from 2 different universities participated towards the completion of this study. The first group consisted of 37 senior students of English Translation Studies. The second group of participants, who took part in the test, consisted of 27 senior students of English Literature. It's worth mentioning that in both groups participants consisted of both males and females. The age range was 20-24.

Instrument

The main instrument of this study was a reading text of 28 lines with a general topic taken from a TOEFL sample book. After reading the text the participants were asked to answer 10 multiple choice comprehension questions about the reading.

4. Procedure

Participants were selected from two universities and were asked if they would volunteer to participate in this study. They were also asked to read the text carefully and answer the 10 comprehension questions. No time limitation was imposed on them. When they finished with the task, their exact reading times were recorded for later data analysis. Each student's task result was evaluated and graded. Only the students who answered at least half of the questions correctly were accounted in this study. The average time and average score of each group were measured and compared with one other.

5. Results Iranian EFL Journal

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The results show that Literature students have done significantly better than Translation students in terms of reading speed (See Table 1). For reasons of space only the average numbers were stated in the following table.

Participants Average Reading Time

(Min)

Average Reading Score

(from 10)

English Literature 12.58 7.53

Translation studies 24.15 7.47

Table 11. The average Time and Score

Independent samples T- Test

Group Statistics

Std. Error Mean Std. Deviation Mean N students

second

.35411 1.77055 12.6884 26 English literature

.60391 3.52139 23.8626 34 Translation studies

Table 2. Descriptive results of the study

Independent Samples Test

Levene's Test

for Equality of

Variances

t-test for Equality of Means

df t Sig. F

Sig. (2-

tailed)

Mean

Difference

Std. Error

Difference

95% Confidence

Interval of the

Difference

Upper Lower

second

Equal variances

assumed

-9.63622 -12.71228 .76807 -11.17425 .000 57 -14.549 .001 11.407

Equal variances

not assumed

-9.76896 -12.57953 .70007 -11.17425 .000 51.261 -15.962

Table 3. Independent Samples t-test of the study

As the results in Table 3 indicates, there is a significant difference between the performance of the two groups. Therefore, the results show that the way reading is treated in the translation class of the study is detrimental to the development of the reading skills, in particular the speed of reading. Iranian EFL Journal 434

6. Discussion

As speed is considered an important factor in reading comprehension (Alderson, 2000) showing mastery of the skill, in this study we attempted to investigate the reading speed of two groups of EFL students majoring in two different EFL fields of study. The main purpose was to examine if their majors exert an influence on their reading speed as a measure of reading fluency. As the results show the average scores of both groups were the same, showing that they did the same in terms of comprehension and understanding. But as the above table shows, English Literature students did much better than English Translation students in terms of time and speed. But what are the main reasons for slow processing of information among Translation students?

It is well established in the field of cognitive psychology that language acquisition can be characterized as a gradual moving process from one state to another. Learners normally begin

language learning from a fragile state of unknown or disequilibrium (Brown, 1996) to a solid state of equilibrium. As learners gain more knowledge about what they learn, i.e., their movement from disequilibrium to equilibrium state, they gain more control over what they learn and thus leave more space for attention. This gradual movement, which is characterized by accumulation of knowledge and more control over what people learn, is a process which is in Shiffrin and Schneider's (1977) view called controlled vs. automatic processing. In fact, automatic processing emerges from practice and does not of necessity require attention as far as identifying words are concerned and runs too quickly. In contrast, controlled processing entails attention and is mostly used for unfamiliar and difficult tasks. Shiffrin and Schneider (op.cit., p:178) stress the importance of automaticity by saying: 'In order to have both fluent reading and good comprehension, the student must be brought beyond accuracy to automaticity in decoding'. Based on the above distinction, the skill of reading should ultimately reach the automatic processing since the quick understanding of a written text is required by the skilled reader. On the other hand, the novice reader is characterized by the controlled processing that he applies to reading. Beginning readers need to switch attention back and forth from decoding to comprehension. In so doing, the reading act is slow and laborious. The following table characterizes this dichotomy:

Controlled processing	Automatic processing
More attention	Less (if any) attention
Slow process	Quick process
Novice learners	Skilled learners

Table 4. Controlled vs. automatic processing features in language acquisition process.

In short, language acquisition based on the automaticity theory is a process of fostering learners to move from a controlled state of procedural knowledge to an automatic state wherein language

processing is seen as an activity which requires less attention to sources of language and quick language processing. The theory fairly covers listening as well as speaking activity. A reader who has reached automatic processing knows the grammar and the lexicon of the language which he has mastered. He does not need to look for word meaning and cram over grammar. When it comes to listening, he does not have to decipher each word in a slow manner. Words are identified and processed at the quickest possible rate thus leaving him more space for understanding the content of the message. And in a similar vein, he does not have to have extended pauses in his speech. He would focus on the content of what he wants to say rather than on the appropriateness of pronunciation and accuracy of grammar.

In translating, the translator's activity is generally a slow motion activity in which the translator, as a starting move, attempts to read each sentence or ideally the whole paragraph to initiate translation. At this point, no matter how skilled a translator is, the unit of translation process is more often than not a sentence. That is, the translator needs to read each sentence and translate it to either his L1 or L2. Here we are concerned with the former. If we are going to schematize the process, it would be sentence A to sentence B design, in which sentence A is the foreign language while sentence B is the source language. In other words, the translator needs to read sentence A, stop and then translate and produce sentence B, which is the recreation of sentence A. The point is that due to the translation task the process of reading to understand a text is interrupted. The process of writing the equivalent involves pauses in the normal course of reading which in turn makes reading nothing more than a controlled process, a process which requires attention not perhaps in terms of quick decoding but in terms of pauses made for the purpose of accuracy in translation. In fact, the translator does not seem to have any other option other than to understand each sentence and translate it. This, on the long run, can be detrimental to the act of reading and naturally to the prospective reader who would want to reach automaticity in both reading and understanding.

It is now endorsed in the reading literature (see for instance, Hosenfeld's 1977, p:115; Smith, 1978, p: 230; Alderson and Urquhart, 1985, p:189; Cotterall, 1990, p: 50; Jaakeslainen, 2000, p: 270) that the reader must be given awareness that not all information in the text are worthy and that he must skip unimportant sections to the benefit of getting more from the text. This can save his energy to tackle the rest of the text thus freeing his Iranian EFL Journal 436

attention to resolve other information by refraining from spending time on repeated trivial information in the text.

The shift of attention from unimportant to important points in the text is said to indicate an advanced application of the reading strategy (Brown et al., 1986). They contend that the ability to regulate one's allocation of attention reflects mastery level and is a late developing skill achieved by a coordination of various forms of knowledge. Brown et al. (p: 61) define these forms of knowledge as:

'(1) information concerning current knowledge, i.e. what is known and not yet known; (2) knowledge of the task demands; (3) knowledge of the relative importance of various elements of texts, i.e. what is important to know and what can be disregarded; and (4) the strategic knowledge to adjust allocation of effort in response to the above information'.

What seems clear in the subject's strategy application is the presence of monitoring comprehension. This comprehension monitoring strategy can be found in translation too when the translator is in the process of reading for meaning. It follows then that the two skills use similar processes in retrieving information from the written text, but the point is that such a retrieval is done for different purposes. In contrast to the reader's task of identifying and separating important information from the trivial, the translator's task is to give equal weight to different parts of the text. Obviously, there is nothing wrong as far as task demands are concerned. A translator should proceed according to the very nature of translation, that is, verbatim translation. However, the point of concern is that a long exposure to translation diet,

unless otherwise required, can impose negative side effects on the reader's selective attention, an attention that ignores the irrelevant stimuli and attends only to the relevant cues. It is a matter of more concern when translation practice becomes the reading godfather.

It also impinges on main idea construction strategy (Lyons, 1981; Afflerbach, 1990), which reflects an attempt to achieve the essence of reading comprehension. The construction of the main idea which usually happens at the end of each paragraph and is clearly a sign of a relatively late developing skill in most skilled readers requires one to make a list of all the important information from the text in a reprocessing manner in order to make a text representation which reflects the subject's attribution of importance to parts of the text rather than making use of redundancy in the text for making hypotheses.

A cognitive strategy that the novice readers usually employ to solve comprehension problems and in particular extract word meaning is using the dictionary. But for many reading scholars, resorting to the dictionary is not recommended as soon as the reader encounters a problem of word meaning. This is because readers are normally advised to use other beneficial Iranian EFL Journal 437 strategies which enhance reading comprehension ability such as guessing the meaning from the context, predicting the flow of information so that they can make hunches as to where to find the relevant information. The point in making hypotheses is that hunches are relative in terms of propositional validity, that is, what we guess may not always be right. Guesses are sometimes right and sometimes wrong. But the true worth of guessing strategy resides in mental development and creativity in reading and this is undoubtedly one of the prime objectives of any reading comprehension plan, so to speak.

While suggestions on reading tend to provoke guessing in word identification, the translator is normally expected to provide the closest possible word for the target text. After all, the translator is not allowed to use equivalent words based on his hunches, since if he does, he often does not do justice to the original text, i.e., keeping the meaning of the original text. So the

difference between reading as an independent activity and reading in translation activity resides in what we call relativity and exactness difference (see Table 5).

Word identification in reading as part of translation activity Exact

Word identification in reading as an independent activity Relative

Table 5. Relativity of word identification in reading and translation

As can be seen, word identification in reading comprehension and in translation differs in terms of the degree to which words are to be identified on the basis of verbatim equivalence. While in translation equivalent word meaning should meet the highest possible degree of closeness, thus requiring the translator to rely more often than not on the dictionary, in reading the reader is recommended to rely less on the dictionary and resort more to guessing meaning from the context. It should also be born in mind that too much reliance on using the dictionary may cause one to get stuck with it and is harmful to developing other independent strategies such as inferring meaning from the context.

7. Conclusion

In this study, we examined the effect of translation on reading comprehension skills, especially on reading speed and presented some reasons from the cognitive side to justify the results of the study. The results obtained as to the purpose of the study can hopefully be interpreted as having some implications for Translation teachers and students in EFL contexts, in order to improve their reading skills along with translation skills.

Three key areas in reading which get improper influence from translation activity were discussed. They covered controlled vs. automatic processing, separating important from Iranian EFL Journal 438

peripheral information, and guessing strategy vs. over-reliance on the dictionary. In order to neutralize the improper effects of translation on reading skills, several suggestions are in order. Students should be given enough opportunity to practice quick decoding in order to understand the meaning before they are actually asked to translate. This practice is important

in as much as not only it activates their background knowledge to know better what the text is all about, but it lessens the possible translation effects on their reading behavior. They should also be informed that the requirements of reading tasks are different from those of translation. This would develop in them a sort of meta-cognitive ability which sharpens their decisions when they approach a translation task.

To compensate for the lack of selective attention due to translation tasks, a course of translation should require practitioners to focus on important sections of the text. Here I would propose two important exercises which satisfy the above concern. They are scanning and main idea construction exercises. Scanning is one valuable asset in this regard. Students can scan a text in search of important information before really attempting to translate. They should know that scanning is done for the purpose of finding general kinds of information. Questions related to specific names or words and later on 'what is this selection about?' can create meta-cognitive abilities in both reading and translation. Hence, books and pamphlets of translation should contain questions which address both exercises which assist reading comprehension and exercises which help students develop translation ability. Since main idea construction is one important reading comprehension skill, and is necessary even for translation purposes, translation texts should contain questions which ask students construct main idea of each paragraph they read. In this way students would get a coherent view of different paragraphs which would on the whole assist them to translate the text better. Thus, and ideally, a translation exercise should initially be a reading comprehension exercise. Upon fulfilling the requirements mentioned above, students should be asked to proceed rendering the text to their own language.

Students should be discouraged to rely too much on the dictionary. They should rather be told to understand words in the context. All words are not equally important in a given context. In addition, the students should be told that when the sentence context does not

clearly define the word, its meaning often becomes clear later in the same paragraph.

However, translation is a risk-free area. A text when rendered, is expected to be as close to the origin as possible. Students should make sure that their translation is the most exact one.

There is nothing wrong with it. But the point is that too much reliance on the dictionary is harmful to learners' ability to guess. Therefore, in order to meet the requirements of both Iranian EFL Journal

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reading and translation, students should be given opportunity to try their own guesses. The process, thus, is as follows. Ask student-translators to guess the meaning of the unknown words based on the context. Ask them also to check their own guesses through looking up those words which are unclear to them in a dictionary when they want to finalize their translation. This process would naturally seem more time-consuming. But this would prove more fruitful to developing better language ability, hence better language cognition.

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