

The Effect of Translation from L2 to L1 on EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension

The Case of Moroccan First Year Baccalaureate Students

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Abstract

The present study investigated the impact of translation from L2 to L1 on Moroccan EFL first year baccalaureate students' reading comprehension. Therefore, it tried to find out: 1) whether translation from L2 to L1 has an effect on students' reading comprehension, 2) Whether translation from L2 to L1 enhances students' reading strategies. To meet these objectives three kinds of research instruments were designed: recall protocol, comprehension questions in the form of true/false questions, and a feedback questionnaire.

The data was collected from two groups (control group and experimental group) and it was subject to descriptive statistical analysis. The findings revealed significant differences between the two groups in favor of the experimental group. However, findings didn't show any significant differences between the two groups in terms of strategies used while reading.

Keywords: Translation, L1, L2, the experimental group, the control group.

1. Introduction

1.2 Statement of the problem:

Reading has often been referred to as a struggle after meaning, especially when foreign language learners are concerned. Goodman (1967) refers to reading as a ‘psycholinguistic guessing game’. The ‘guessing’, however, is a principled one drawing upon two sources to guide it: the text itself and what the readers bring to the text. All readers bring with them knowledge of the world including their first language. But this language can either help them understand the text or not, depending on similarities and differences between L2 and their L1.

Given the importance of L1 in the process of learning L2, the present study tries to demonstrate the effect of translation from L2 to L1 on Moroccan EFL first year baccalaureate students’ reading comprehension. The rest of the present chapter will introduce the objectives of the study, the rationale for undertaking it, the research questions related to the objectives, and will end with a presentation of the organization of the rest of the paper.

1.3 Objectives of the study

The aim of this study is to investigate the impact of translation from L2 to L1 on Moroccan EFL learners’ reading comprehension, thus this study will try to find out:

- 1) Whether the translation from L2 to L1 helps Moroccan EFL learners develop their proficiency in reading comprehension.
- 2) What strategies are used by Moroccan EFL first year baccalaureate students while reading (as a secondary objective of the study)

1.4 Rationale of the study

The first reason behind conducting this study is because of the importance of reading in FL classes. Students who read a lot “do not only improve in their reading abilities, but also improve in using and increasing their English abilities and knowledge. Without getting much exposure to reading materials in class, EFL students are unlikely to make much progress” (Nation, 1997). However, Moroccan EFL students, especially beginners, cannot understand English texts with a gap in terms of vocabulary, structures, and cultural knowledge.

For this reason, the present study will try to find out whether translation from L2 to L1 affects students' reading comprehension.

1.5 Research questions

The research questions of the present study are as follows:

- 1) Does translation from L2 to L1 has an impact on Moroccan EFL students' reading comprehension?
- 2) What strategies do learners use for achieving reading comprehension?

2. Review of Literature

This chapter provides an account of the literature related to the the effect of translation from L1 to L2 on EFL learners' reading comprehension. Thus two crucial notions will be discussed here: the first one is the use of the mother tongue in an L2 classroom and the second notion is reading comprehension.

2.1 The use of the mother tongue in an L2 classroom

The debate about using L1 in an EFL class is not a new issue but it has been much discussed by EFL teachers around the world since the end of the 19th century, starting with the grammar translation method, that suggests the use of the mother tongue in EFL classrooms, till the communicative method and post-methods era that discard this kind of translation. So the use of translation from and to the mother tongue was usual at the end of the 19th century and began its decline in the turn of the century with the emergence of other new different methods such as the direct method and the audiolingual method. However, at the end of the 20th century, many scholars revived this issue and shed light on the importance of the mother tongue in EFL classrooms.

2.1.1 Supporting the use of L1 in an L2 class

Atkinson (1987) advocates the idea of using the mother tongue and he argues that translation from L1 to a new taught vocabulary or structure of L2 helps students to differentiate between the characteristics of each language. Thus, this helps students to create a cognitive map that relate the target language to the mother language according to their similarities and differences.

On the other hand, using the mother tongue fills the gap in L2 but the frequency of using L1 will depend on the student's level. A beginner student will use his/her mother tongue more than an advanced one. In this respect, Stern (1992:285) states that "the use of L1 and target language should be seen as complementary, depending on the characteristics and stages of the language learning process".

In the same vein, Cook (2002:6) claims that going from one language to another is an everyday fact that cannot be denied because it is universal. Today, in the globalized world where we live, people learn as much languages as they can because it becomes a must for communication and trade purposes, so switching from one language to another becomes normal and common. Likewise, Stern (1992:282) states that "the L1-L2 connection is an indisputable fact of life, whether we like it or not the new knowledge is learnt on the basis of the previously acquired language". Therefore, interference between the two languages occurs and may lead to false translation, but this is inevitable since an L2 learner already knows a previous language system (L1). The solution of this problem is to help the learner detect similarities and differences between the two languages.

2.1.2 Refusing the use of L1 in an L2 class

Heltai (1989: 288) points out that the rejection of the Grammar translation method is due to its incapability to improve students' communicative skills. Instead of doing that it promotes hard and boring learning. So Heltai and many other scholars who are opponents of the use of the mother tongue in L2 classes relate this method with translation since the grammar translation method consists of hard grammar drills and translation from and to the mother tongue.

Another idea that is against the use of L1 is presented by Krashen (1981) who argues that learners must learn L2 the same way as they learn their mother tongue; that is to say, without any reference to L1 because the baby learn L1 without any previous language in mind. And according to Sharma (2006: 80), the reason for using L2 only is that "the more students are exposed to English the more quickly they will learn; as they hear and use English, they will internalize it to begin to think in English; the only way they will learn it is if they are forced to use it". But what if a student develops a resistance attitude toward this force?

The idea of forcing L2 only on students seems not adequate because the student may think , as Hopkins (1988) said, that "his/her identity is threatened".

While when the mother tongue is used freely in the classroom, students feel that their language is valuable which make them learn at ease (Echevarria and Grave, 1998).

2.2 Reading comprehension

2.2.1 Definition

The national center of literacy and numeracy for adults website (2012) defines reading comprehension as:

“the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language. We use the words extracting and constructing to emphasize both the importance and the insufficiency of the text as a determinant of reading comprehension”.

So the reader extracts an existing meaning within a text but at the same time he/she constructs the meaning when it is not clear or when it needs encyclopedic knowledge that help in making sense of a word, phrase or sentence.

2.2.2 Interaction between L1 and L2

The concept of schema supports the idea of interaction between L1 and L2 while reading and this was proved by many scholars such as Kern (1994: 455) who found that this mental translation between L2 and L1 plays "an important and multidimensional role in the L2 reading comprehension processes". In the same vein Upton (1997) found in his experiment on Japanese ESL learners that “readers with different levels of L2 proficiency make use of their first and second languages to different extents in their attempts to make sense of a text they are reading”; Therefore, we can say that beginning students resort more to their L1 than advanced students in the process of reading comprehension, and this was argued by Hawras (1996: 65) (Cited in Upton (1997)) who stated that “mental translation is not just the major, but the only comprehension tool at the student’s disposal” for beginning students.

3. Methodology:

The present chapter will describe the methodology followed to carry out the experiment in the present study. Therefore, this chapter attempts to present and examine the research design, the subjects, the data collection instruments, the material and the procedures of the study.

In order to meet the objectives of this study, two groups will be selected randomly from a number of first year baccalaureate students.

3.1 The research design

The present study tries to show the effect of translation from L2 to L1 on EFL learners' reading comprehension. Its main objective, therefore, is to find out whether the translation from L2 to L1 influences EFL learners' performance. As a secondary objective, the study also seeks to investigate the impact of translation from L2 to L1 on the strategies used by Moroccan EFL learners in comprehending texts that include some new vocabulary.

To achieve these objectives, the study involved two groups, an experimental group and a control group. The experimental group benefited from translation to the native language (Arabic) of the new encountered vocabulary and the control group was taught only through English without exposure to any kind of translation. The aim was to investigate the strength of relationship between comprehension (the dependent variable) and translation from L2 to L1 (the independent variable) since "the dependent variable 'depends' on the independent variable" (Hatch and Lazaraton, 1991:64). A pilot study was conducted to test the validity and reliability of the instruments and the material, and to control any unpredictable or external variable. In addition, the means of the control and the experimental groups had to be compared in order to measure the extent to which the data yielded by the two groups are similar or different.

3.1.1 The pilot study

The pilot study can be considered as a preliminary study through which the instruments and the materials were piloted. It should be noted here that both the pilot and main studies followed the same procedures and used the same materials and instruments.

The pilot study sample consisted of 10 students (4 girls and 6 boys) from first year baccalaureate students, Ibn Alkhatib high school (Tangier). This group was randomly selected among the students of one first year baccalaureate EFL class and was divided also randomly into a control group which included 5 students (2 boys and 3 girls) and an experimental group which included 5 students (4 boys and 1 girl).

Students in both groups belonged to the same class, had the same educational background, and were teenagers whose age ranged between 15 and 17 years. All students are Moroccans.

As for the proficiency level in English, it is assumed that since the subjects belong to the same class, there should not be much variability among students.

The reading material used in the pilot study was the same material used in the main study. It consisted of a text dealing with the hardest language and was taken from www.usingenglish.com

3.1.2 The main study

The main study sample shared almost the same characteristics as the pilot study sample. It consisted of 20 students (12 girls and 8 boys) from the first year baccalaureate level at Ibn Alkhatib high school in Tangier. These students shared the same background: the same educational level, the same origin (Moroccans) and all belonged to the same class. The subjects were also divided into a control group that included 10 students (7 girls and 3 boys) and an experimental group that included 10 students (5 girls and 5 boys). As for the proficiency level in English, it is again assumed that there should not be much variability among the subjects since they belong to same class.

3.1.3 The reading material:

As mentioned above, the reading text used in the study dealt with the topic of the hardest language. The text included a title, four paragraphs, the introduction and a conclusion. The introduction introduced the topic of the text; i.e., which language is the hardest to learn which was elaborated in the rest of the text while the conclusion summed up the gist of the text. i.e., the difficulty of learning a language depends on the difference between this language and the mother tongue. In other words, languages which are related to the mother tongue are easier than other languages with different writing systems. However, this is not all the time true. Thus, it is difficult to say that one language is the hardest language.

The first paragraph discussed that the first language affect the learning of the second language and the greater the differences between the second language and the first, the harder it will be for most people to learn.

The second paragraph discussed some variables that influence learning a second language and that make one learner faster than another one such as teachers, circumstances in which the language is learned, and learner's motivation.

The third paragraph discussed that the second hardest language for British diplomats and other embassy staff is the Japanese language which is not a surprise but the first hardest language for them is the Hungarian.

The fourth paragraph discussed that the difficulty of Hungarian for British learners is not a question of the writing system which uses similar alphabet but the grammatical complexity of this language. This difficulty depends on the distance between the mother tongue and the second language.

3.1.4 Text analysis:

The approach adopted to analyse the text is the idea unit analysis. A number of studies used this approach to measure the quantity and quality of idea units recalled such as Steffensen, Joag-Dev and Anderson, 1979; Carrell, 1984a, 1984b, 1985, 1987 and Floyd And Carell, 1987 (cited in Roebuck, 1998). The present study modified the hierarchy of these idea units and it distinguished between main ideas, major ideas, and supporting details to simplify and fit the needs of the study.

Actually, each idea unit consisted of a single clause (either main or subordinate) or a separable phrase which carried a communicative message. Moreover, the idea unit analysis was organized into hierarchical levels. Each idea unit was determined to be main idea, major idea, or minor idea according to the following criteria:

Main idea: each paragraph includes at least one main idea unit representing the main idea to be developed in that paragraph.

Major idea: represents the supporting ideas in each paragraph.

Minor idea: represents minor details in each paragraph.

The analysis of the text yielded 66 idea units. To begin with, the introduction includes 8 idea units: 1 main idea, 6 major ideas, and 1 minor idea. The first paragraph includes 18 idea units: 1 main idea, 12 major ideas, and 5 minor ideas. The second paragraph includes 9 idea units: 2 main ideas, 6 major ideas, and 1 main idea. The third paragraph contains 17 idea units: 3 main ideas, 8 major ideas, and 6 minor ideas. The fourth paragraph includes 6 idea units: 1 main idea, 5 major ideas, and 1 minor idea. The conclusion includes 7 idea units: 2 main ideas, 4 major ideas, and 1 minor idea.

3.1.5 Instruments

Three different instruments were used in data collection. The rationale behind using different data collection instruments is to control for the reliability of the result. Variety of instruments also helped in getting varied data and richer results.

3.1.5.1 Recall protocol

The main instrument in the present study is the recall protocol. The choice of this instrument is based on the fact that it is the most widely used instrument in similar studies. It helps in measuring the number of ideas students are able to understand and remember after reading a text.

The rationale behind using the recall protocol is to find out the extent to which students have understood the text. It is assumed that students cannot recall ideas that are not clearly understood; otherwise, the recalled ideas would be distorted or misinterpreted.

3.1.5.2 Comprehension questions:

This instrument contained open ended question to test learner's reading comprehension and also to offer them the opportunity to express themselves freely. The advantage of open ended questions is that they do not limit learners' thinking to specific answers to choose from like in multiple choice questions. For example, learners may have other answers in mind which are different from those provided by limited choices. This is why it was believed that it would be better to let them answer the way they like.

3.1.5.3 Feedback questionnaire:

The third instrument in the present study consisted of a feedback questionnaire that was administered at the end of the experiment. The objective was to get an idea about the subject's reactions concerning the study, the difficulties they found and the strategies they used. This questionnaire also helped elicit information about subjects' familiarity with the text content.

All the questions were open ended questions and students were asked to justify their answers. The use of open ended questions, as stated above, allowed students to express their ideas freely and to provide data that is not influenced by any available choices.

3.1.6 Administration and collection of the research instruments

The administration and collection of the instruments were performed by the researcher himself with the help of the English teacher of the subjects.

The first day was devoted to the piloting study, which lasted one hour and a half for both the control group and the experimental group. Five copies of the instruments were distributed to each group because, as mentioned before, the piloting study included two groups of 5 students each. The control group was the first to begin the test, and when they finished, the experimental group took its turn. At the end of the test, ten copies were collected.

The second day was devoted to the main study which also included two groups (the experimental and the control group) of 10 students each. Students in both groups were instructed to read the text at their own rate and try to understand it with the help of the researcher; i.e. , the researcher translate difficult vocabulary and passages of the text into Arabic to the experimental group and explain the difficult terms and passages through English to the control group. Subjects took about 20 minutes then the researcher and the teacher collected back the text so that students would not refer back to it during their recall. They were given a recall sheet and were instructed to write down as much accurate information as they could remember from the text. They were told that they could use words from the text or their own words. This stage took about half an hour; i.e. , subjects were allowed to take enough time for the written recall. After that the comprehension questions' sheets were distributed and answered in about 20 minutes and at the final stage, students were given the feedback questionnaire that was answered and collected in about 20 minutes. At the end of the test 20 copies of the instruments were collected.

3.1.7 Scoring

3.1.7.1. Quantity of idea units recalled

As explained above, the text used in the present study was analysed and divided into sets of organized idea units. The recall protocols were scored against the 66 idea units of the original text. They were scored for the presence of each idea unit from the original text. An idea unit was deemed to have been recalled if it was reproduced literally or if the essential meaning of that particular idea was present in the recall.

The changes that the students made when recalling the text were also scored according to the idea unit analysis. These changes are divided into two types: the first category is called elaborations which are defined in the literature as consisting of culturally appropriate extensions of the text.

They are “produced when someone knowledgeable about the culture provides additional culturally correct information not found in or logically inferable from the text” (Carrell, 1987: 270). However, the present study elaborations refer to any extensions of the text or additional information that do not exist in the reading material be they appropriate or not. The second category is referred to as distortions that are inappropriate recalled idea units or modifications of the text. They are “often outright intrusions from another culture, in which unfamiliar ideas are interpreted, remembered, and recalled in terms of another cultural schema” (Ibid).

3.1.7.2 Quality of idea units recalled

Based on the idea unit analysis, the scoring was quite easy, especially that the idea units of the original text were organized into a hierarchy. This organization was useful in the sense that it allowed an analysis of the recall protocols in terms of the levels of idea units recalled, elaborated or distorted. Organizing the idea units in such a hierarchical way was also helpful in determining whether the translation from L2 to L1 used with the experimental group was effective at all hierarchical levels or only for certain levels.

4. Data Analysis

This chapter will discuss the results obtained from the data analysis. It will discuss results obtained from analysis of (1) the recall protocol, (2) the comprehension questions, (3) the feedback questionnaire.

4.1 Discussion of the results

In the literature, there is evidence of the relationship between Translation from L2 to L1 and Reading Comprehension (e.g.Hashim and Seng, 2006). The present study also investigates the effect of translation from L2 to L1 on Moroccan students’ reading comprehension. It attempts to find out whether translating from L2 to L1 helps Moroccan EFL students better understand the text or not. Discussing the findings yielded by the different instruments used in data collection will concern what follows:

4.1.1 Discussion of the results yielded by the recall protocol

4.1.1.1 Appropriately recalled idea units

The experimental group recalled more idea units than did the control group.

The fact that the experimental groups in both the pilot and the main studies recalled more idea units than did the control group supports the idea that translation from L2 to L1 has a positive impact on the experimental groups' reading comprehension.

the findings of this study shows that translation from L2 to L1 while reading a text helps students to bridge the gap between what they know and what they need to know. That is, the students use their existing schemas in order to understand and put in order the new information in these schemas or they might create new schemas when they don't match between the new information and the pre-existing schemas. Therefore, the results of this study support the findings of previous experimental studies.

4.1.1.2 Distortions and elaborations:

The recall protocols of both groups were full of distortions and elaborations. Distortions occur "when there is a lack of correspondence between the schemata embodied in the text and the schemata by which the reader assimilated the text" (Anderson, Reynolds, Schallert and Goetz, 1977: 377). As for elaborations, they are considered as extensions to the information of the text, in that the reader adds some information which are not included in the text.

The findings of the present study shows that the experimental group made less distortions and less elaborations than did the control group, and this is due to translation that the experimental group benefited from while reading the text.

4.1.2 Discussion of the results yielded by the comprehension questions and the feedback questionnaire:

The majority of the experimental group's answers to comprehension questions was positive as they provided more correct answers than did the control group. So this shows that the experimental group benefited positively from the translation from L2 to L1.

The results of the feedback questionnaire, on the other hand, show that the experimental group found the text interesting, familiar, and easier than the control group did. And this, in turn, supports that translation from L2 to L1 has a positive impact on Moroccan EFL students' reading comprehension.

The fifth question of the feedback questionnaire (used to test the second research question of the study) tries to illustrate the different strategies used by Moroccan EFL students to overcome

the difficulties they encounter while reading. Most students from both groups show that they use the same strategies to overcome the difficulties they face. They said that they concentrate on the context to understand because it is difficult to get everything while reading. Other students from the experimental group said that they concentrate on main points and they try to relate them to what their background knowledge. Thus, the experimental group benefited from the translation, in that they concentrated on main ideas and thus made fewer errors, as opposed to the control group who made more distortions and elaborations. Although most members of this group said in the questionnaire that they relate what they read with what they know about the world, they produced many errors apparently because their knowledge of the topic is not enough to understand the text they have read.

5. Summary of the study

The present study tried to investigate the effect of translation from L2 to L1 on Moroccan EFL first year baccalaureate students' reading comprehension. For this reason, the study designed three different instruments (recall protocol, comprehension questions, and a feedback questionnaire) and tested reading comprehension of two groups from the same class (EFL first year baccalaureate students): a control group and an experimental group. The latter benefited from a translation activity while reading.

The control group performed less than the experimental group in all the instruments used in this study. This means that the translation activity helped students of the experimental group to develop their proficiency in reading comprehension.

The main pedagogical implication of this study is that while reading activities such as teaching and translating vocabulary and structures from L2 to L1, discussion, semantic mapping, etc. enhance Moroccan EFL first year baccalaureate students' reading comprehension.

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