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EFL Learners Beliefs about Translation and its Use as a Strategy in Writing

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ABSTRACT

Although translation in learning a foreign or second language is frowned upon by many language practitioners, it is nonetheless used by language learners as a viable strategy. To date, few studies have investigated the effect of translation on writing. This study explored the use of translation by Iranian university students, particularly with regard to their beliefs concerning translation and using it as a strategy in writing. Forty female and male students of English at Shiraz Azad University participated. In addition to an interviewing guide, two sets of questionnaires were employed: the Inventory for Beliefs about Translation (IBT), and the Inventory for Translation as a Learning Strategy (ITLS). Results indicate the respondents believed that translation facilitated the acquisition of English writing skills.

INTRODUCTION

In language classes, translation—under the sway of shifting trends in language pedagogy—has been regarded differently at different points in time. Some language educators deem it as a catalyst in language learning, whereas others totally discourage or even reject it. From the turn of the last century onwards, it has been generally assumed that L1 merely interferes in the L2 learning process (i.e., the use of L1 hampers the acquisition of L2).

Early in the twentieth century, according to the tenets of the Grammar Translation Method, translation was highly thought of and utilized as a means to learn language. Later on, the advocates of the Direct Method and the Audio-Lingual Method took issue with this view and even went on to disallow it. The dominant Communicative Language Teaching approach, with its chief focus on the target language, considers little or no role for L1 and translation.

In spite of the recent objections, translation in language learning still persists (Naiman, Frolich, Stern, & Todesco, 1978; Politzer, 1983; O'Malley, 1985; Chamot, 1987). Naiman et al. (1978) sought to identify strategies drawn upon by “Good Language Learners” (GLLs), and found that one of the strategies often used by GLLs was to “refer back to their native language(s) judiciously [translate into L1] and make effective cross-lingual comparisons at different stages of

language learning” (p. 14). Increasingly, studies suggest a facilitative role of translation or L1 transfer in students’ language learning (Baynham, 1983; Titford, 1985; Perkins, 1985; Ellis, 1985; Atkinson, 1987; Newmark, 1991; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1992; Kern, 1994; Husain, 1995; Marti Viano & Orquin, 1982; Omura, 1996; Prince, 1996; Cohen & Brooks-Carson, 2001).

Over the past decades, there has been an increasing awareness of, and attention to, strategies as language educators unanimously agree that strategy use contributes to language learning. O’Malley (1985) found that translation is a frequently used learning strategy. Of 11 cognitive strategies identified by the researchers, translation constituted 11.3% of all strategy uses by beginner and intermediate ESL learners, second only to such strategies as repetition (19.6%), note taking (18.7%), and imagery (12.5%).

Researchers suggest that learners’ preconceived beliefs would influence the way they use learning strategies (Horwitz, 1987, 1988; Abraham & Vann, 1987; Wenden, 1986a, 1986b, 1987a, 1987b). Wenden’s (1987b) study illustrated how beliefs affected learners’ choice of strategies, their attending pattern, criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of a language learning activity, and their planning priorities. Also, Horwitz (1987) contended that some preconceived beliefs could restrict the learners’ range of strategy use.

Sager (1994) stated that the closest of the four language skills to the translation process was the writing skill, since they share similarities in terms of approach and features. To this end, we decided to probe Iranian students’ beliefs about translation and how they use translation as a strategy in writing. The researchers developed the following questions:

1. What are Iranian students’ beliefs about using translation as a strategy in writing in English?
2. To what extent do learners’ background variables (e.g., proficiency level) relate to their beliefs about, and use of, translation?
3. What are the relationships between learners’ beliefs about translation and their use of translation as a strategy in writing?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Learners’ Beliefs about Translation

Students have varied standpoints regarding the use of translation in their foreign language learning. In an attempt to investigate students’ views, Horwitz (1988) found that the majority of German (70%) and Spanish (75%) students agreed that learning a foreign language is largely a matter of learning to translate from English, whereas only 15% of the French students approved of the same statement. Kern (1994) stated that though language instructors and learners realized the inevitability of mental translation in reading L2 texts, both often view translation as an undesirable “crutch.” As for the use of translation in learning L2 vocabulary, Prince (1996) noted that students often believe that learning through translation, with the new word being linked to its native-language equivalent, is more effective than learning vocabulary in context. Regarding students’ perceptions about L2 writing through translation compared to writing directly in the L2, Kobayashi and Rinnert (1992) observed that 88% of the higher-proficiency Japanese participants preferred direct composition over translation, while 53% of lower proficiency students also favored direct composition. Several students said that they preferred direct writing because they wanted to be able to think in English.

Wen and Johnson (1997) carried out an in-depth qualitative study (on 10 students studying English in China) to discern the differences between high and low achievers through interviews, diary studies, and strategy use while working on a reading task. Wen and Johnson concluded that Chinese students should be encouraged to suppress the use of translation resolutely and consciously.

In contrast to what Wen and Johnson concluded, Hsieh (2000) reported that translation benefited his Taiwanese students' English reading strategies, vocabulary learning, as well as cultural background knowledge: 85% of the respondents to his questionnaire expressed that translating helped them pay attention to the coherence and contextualization of English reading text; 73% reported that they learned the importance of their native language (Chinese) through translation; 65% thought that they became more aware of multiple meanings of an English word; and 62% felt that translation helped extend vocabulary knowledge and reading skills. On the whole, these students believed that the adoption of translation had a desirable effect on their English reading and vocabulary learning. Prince's (1996) research results indicated the superiority of using translation in learning vocabulary in terms of quantity of words learned.

Of the modalities of communicative competence, writing in a second language is indubitably the most difficult to attain. Several studies (Zhai, 2008; Cumming, 1989; Uzawa, 1996; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1992; Cohen & Brooks-Carson, 2001) have delved into the effect of composing in L1 and then translating into L2. Zhai (2008) concluded that the lower-level learners benefit most from the translated writing. Similarly, Cumming (1989) reported that inexpert French ESL writers use their first language to generate content, and expert writers, in contrast, use translation not just to generate content but to verify appropriate word choice.

Lower-proficiency writers were reported to have benefited from so doing (Uzawa, 1996). Kobayashi and Rinnert (1992) reported that Japanese college students writing English essays through Japanese translation were rated higher than their peers who wrote directly in English. The students felt that the ideas were easier to develop, thoughts and opinions could be expressed more clearly, and words could be more easily found through the use of the dictionary. Cohen and Brooks-Carson (2001) did a study on 39 intermediate learners of French who performed two essay writing tasks: writing directly in French as well as writing in the first language, and then translating into French. Two thirds of the students did better on the direct-writing task across all rating scales, and one third did better on the translated task. The researchers suggested that direct writing in French as a target language may be the most effective choice for some learners when placed under time pressure.

METHOD

Participants

The subjects were randomly selected out of 90 students; they were 40 female and male students (whose ages ranged between 19 and 25) who were learning English as a foreign language at Shiraz Azad University. Their level of proficiency (according to their scores in essay writing and their teachers' opinion) was estimated to be upper intermediate. For the qualitative interviewing, three successful and three less successful English learners were chosen, based upon their English marks and teachers' recommendations.

Instrumentation

Two questionnaires and one interview guide developed by Liao (2006) were modified and employed. For the beliefs measurement, Inventory for Beliefs about Translation (IBT) was used; for the strategy-use measurement, the Inventory for Translation as a Learning Strategy (ITLS) was used; and for interviewing, the Interview Guide was used. These questionnaires were originally administered in Taiwan, and were adjusted for the Iranian context. To check the validity of these questionnaires, two English university teachers randomly selected thirty sophomores who were writing essays two hours a week for one term. Then the reliability was calculated in SPSS through Cronbach's alpha.

Table 1. Reliability for IBT items

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	No. of Items
0.703	0.727	22

Table 2. Reliability for ITLS items

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	No. of Items
0.846	0.844	30

Data Collection

Following a brief explanation and clear instructions, the questionnaires were administered to the subjects who were given 30 minutes to answer the questions. The interview data was collected soon after the survey was completed. Three successful and three less successful English learners were then chosen. The semi-structured interview lasted from approximately 30 minutes to an hour and was tape-recorded. In the interview, both successful and less successful interviewees could switch to Persian when necessary.

Data Analysis

Descriptive Analysis of the IBT

The subjects responded to the IBT items on the Likert scale of 1 to 5, indicating the degree to which they agreed with statements concerning their beliefs about translation and its use as a strategy in learning English writing. The means and standard deviation of the participants' responses were computed and the level of significance was considered 0.5. The results are presented in Table 3. Most of the respondents subscribed to the view that translation has a positive role in learning to write in English. Of the 22 items, 2 items (21 and 18) had the highest means (3.22 and 3.17) and item 1 was relatively low (2.07).

Table 3. The Mean and Standard Deviation for IBT

Item Number	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>
1	40	2.0750	1.09515
2	40	2.4250	.95776
3	40	2.1500	.97534
4	40	2.4750	1.10911
5	40	2.3500	1.09895
6	40	2.6500	1.31168
7	40	2.4750	1.01242
8	40	2.5500	.98580
9	40	2.5000	.93370
10	40	2.8500	1.27199
11	40	2.7000	1.06699
12	40	2.7000	1.26491
13	40	2.5500	.95943
14	40	2.5500	1.01147
15	40	2.7000	1.26491
16	40	2.8500	1.27199
17	40	2.7250	1.21924
18	40	3.1750	1.31826
19	40	2.7000	1.26491
20	40	2.6500	1.21000
21	40	3.2250	1.14326
22	40	2.6750	1.14102

On the whole, the respondents were almost united in the belief that translation contributed substantially to the acquisition of their writing skill, which is in line with Sager's (1994) findings that, of the four language skills, translation and writing are the closest parallel activities, and they share similarities in approach and features. These findings were further supported by the interviews conducted with the 3 high-proficient and 3 low-proficient students. The interviewees expressed both positive and negative effects of using translation in their learning process. The positive aspects expressed included (1) translation can help students check whether their comprehension is correct; (2) it can facilitate their comprehension in English; (3) it can help them develop and express ideas in another language; and (4) it can serve to alleviate stress and boost motivation to learn writing. On the other hand, the negative aspects of using translation were: (1) translation can be erroneous because of multiple meanings of certain terms; (2) students are likely to produce Persian-style English; (3) students may depend heavily on translation which may impede their progress in learning English writing.

Descriptive Analysis of the ITLS

The selected students were also asked to rate statements on a 5-point Likert scale in order to find out how frequently they used translating as a strategy. Their scores were added up and averaged. The means and standard deviations for the ITLS items are displayed in Table 4. Six

most frequently used strategies (items 6, 8, 15, 9, 14, and 10) out of 30 items received high means (3.17, 3.07, 3.07, 3.05, 3.05, and 3.00), while five items (1, 13, 4, 20, 30) were the least utilized strategies with means (2.02, 2.3, 2.32) according to the significant level at 0.5.

Table 4. The Means and Standard Deviations for ITLS Items

Item Number	<i>N</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>
1	40	2.0250	1.0974
2	40	2.4000	1.0573
3	40	2.5000	1.3008
4	40	2.3250	1.2483
5	40	2.5500	1.2184
6	40	3.1750	1.2380
7	40	2.8250	1.1742
8	40	3.0750	1.0951
9	40	3.0500	1.3765
10	40	3.0000	1.3008
11	40	2.7750	1.3104
12	40	2.6250	1.2544
13	40	2.3000	1.0907
14	40	3.0500	1.2999
15	40	3.0750	1.1632
16	40	2.8000	1.1140
17	40	2.6250	1.1477
18	40	2.5500	1.2800
19	40	2.8250	1.2787
20	40	2.3250	0.9971
21	40	2.7500	1.1266
22	40	2.7500	1.1266
23	40	2.6500	1.1446
24	40	2.4000	1.1723
25	40	2.8750	1.0904
26	40	2.8250	1.2171
27	40	2.8750	1.1807
28	40	3.0000	1.2195
29	40	2.5000	1.2608
30	40	2.3250	1.1851

The Influence of Background Variables on Strategy Use

MANOVA was performed to examine the effects of students' background on their beliefs regarding translation and how they use translation to learn writing. The factors of the ITLS questionnaire were deemed as the dependent variables, while the participants' background variables, such as English proficiency, served as the independent variables. For the purposes of our study, higher- and lower-English proficiency students were defined based upon their English

scores in essay writing at the end of the semester and their teacher's recommendations. The results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Students' Background and Their Beliefs

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	f	Sig.
Corrected Model	526.500	1	562.500	174.347	.000
Intercept	8820.900	1	8820.900	2734.047	.000
Proficiency	562.500	1	562.500	174.347	.000
Error	122.600	38	3.226		
Total	9506.000	40			
Corrected	685.100	39			

Note: Dependent variable is the score.

On the basis of these findings, the background variable of English proficiency was significant for the use of translation in learning writing, and thus makes a significant difference in translation beliefs and strategy use in the quantitative analysis of the present study.

Qualitative Interview

As explained before, the interview data was gathered from more proficient and less proficient English learners. Both groups recognized the crucial role of translation in their writing. Even so, they have different understandings of translation and how it should be used in writing. Less proficient interviewees perceived translation as a word-for-word process, meaning they would write Persian translation between the lines of English texts. By contrast, more proficient learners preferred to write directly in English and to translate only when necessary. Apparently, the latter group had a better sense of when and how to utilize translation. It also appeared that they preferred learning English through English, recognizing that over-reliance on translation can sometimes be counterproductive, resulting in the inappropriate transfer of features from Persian to English, and the making of grammatical mistakes.

CONCLUSION

Many English teachers hold the belief that translation comes in useful solely in the initial stages of learning. At the academic level, it is believed that English without translation should be used as students are believed to know English well enough to improve their writing skills without reverting to their mother tongue. However, some experts, their opinions based on empirical studies and students' perspectives, hold the view that learners draw upon knowledge of

their native language and rely on translation as they attempt to discover the complexities of English. As the findings of this study indicated, the use of translation can be a valuable resource or means which can pave the way for the development of the writing skill. As Horwitz (1988) reported, learners' beliefs regarding language learning are based on limited knowledge and experience, and these beliefs are likely to influence students' effectiveness of their learning. Teachers need to be attentive to, and conscious of, students' beliefs. Four conclusions were drawn:

- (1) Most participants endorsed the belief that translation contributed to their writing, but nonetheless, they had conflicting beliefs as to the effects of translation as a strategy.
- (2) The students showed medium to high use of translation as a learning strategy in writing, and they used a wide variety of strategies to learn writing.
- (3) Their belief regarding translation affected the translation strategies they choose in writing.
- (4) More proficient participants tended to report negative beliefs concerning translation and less use of translation compared with their less proficient peers.

The findings of this study and other similar studies in this vein can provide teachers with insight into the role of translation in the students' learning process and ways to integrate this insight into their instruction. Teachers may not need to ban students' use of translation altogether, and they should be more aware of the instances when translation can be of help as students try to develop their English-language system. Teachers might opt to suggest translation more for some learners than others, based on their cognitive styles and learning strategies. It would also be prudent to raise their level of conscious awareness about the pros and cons of translating, and to encourage them to view translation as an effective strategy, but to use it cautiously and judiciously. At the same time, they should refrain from the possible pitfalls of L1 interference and word-for-word translations.

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