Translation as a language learning tool: The impact of Translation practices on the vocabulary Knowledge of Saudi EFL learners

Turky Alshaikhi
Department of Languages & Translation
University of Tabuk

Abstract: The present paper focuses on the use of translation practices in helping learners to acquire, develop and strengthen their knowledge and competence in the English language in terms of a broader vocabulary size. Translation activities make students communicate both into and from the foreign language. Students can make the best out of their learning if they are encouraged to use translation skills properly. Translation activities are used within the context of the English translation courses in the department of Languages and Translation at the University of Tabuk (UT), KSA. This study follows the notion of Pym (2013) that emphasises the role of translation in L2 learning. It encompasses the two variables: translation practice and vocabulary knowledge. It analyses learners’ language proficiency based on various translation activities (practices) in the language classroom and analysis of their vocabulary knowledge using pre and post-tests. Results of the study shows that translation helped learners to promote and improve their L2. The study also recommends that translation could be with great asset to EFL teachers and shed light on its advantages. Moreover, the findings of the study suggest that translation is also a good tool when aimed at vocabulary enhancement which will, of course, result in better translation skills.

Key words: Translation practices, vocabulary size, Saudi EFL learners' language teaching, translation method, learning tool, language skills.

Introduction

Translation has always been the core of the controversies on whether it can be a useful and effective tool in foreign language learning. Until
recently, translation was out of favor with the language teaching community. Translation as a language learning activity was considered as being unstable within the context of foreign language learning (Brown, 2007). It was criticized because it was perceived as closely related to traditional grammar-translation. Even today, translation is often regarded as the mechanical linguistic transfer of meaning from one language to another. It is still ignored as a useful language learning tool because it is a communicative activity that is not suited to the general needs of the language learner. Translation has thus been considered time-consuming, boring, and irrelevant.

However, there has been an increasing interest in translation practice in the foreign language classroom in the last few decades. Recently, foreign language teachers have been reviving the use of translation for various learning purposes. It has been observed that translation ies could be used for pedagogical purposes and other traditional language teaching activities. Reading, grammar exercises, translation — “are, in fact, perceived by learners to be conducive to learning” (McDonough, 2007, p.49). The present study grew out of long-term teaching practice. It was observed that the application of translation methods to language teaching induces deeper insight into the content of the material to be taught.

The question discussed in this paper is of how relevant translation exercises are for enhancing foreign language skills. The present article proves that translation is a valid method for language practice and improvement. The paper’s objectives are, firstly, to describe the translation activities that raise students’ awareness of language use and, secondly, to examine the usefulness of translation in learning the English language. The methodology for the study is as follows: there will be an overview of the theoretical background, and an analysis of pre and post-tests for vocabulary size of effect by the translation activities in the language classroom.

Translation in foreign language classes is in the process of becoming a form of “pedagogical translation”, which is no longer viewed as an ineffective tool in language learning and is evaluated as a way to enrich learners’ competencies. Students taught by using pedagogical translation
are encouraged to practice reading, writing, vocabulary, grammar and speaking. One of the main aims of foreign language teaching is to develop the student’s ability to communicate in the target language. Ross (2000) states that translation is recognized as the fifth and most important social skill since it promotes communication and understanding. As a form of communication, translation involves interaction and cooperation between people, which makes it a very useful tool in foreign language teaching. Translation heightens language awareness. While students engaged in the translation are focused on identifying differences in structure and vocabulary, they have to evolve strategies to deal with them and negotiate the potential of both languages. The real usefulness of translation in foreign language classes lies in comparing grammar, vocabulary, word order and other language points in the target language and the student’s mother tongue. Students are directly exposed to the contrasting language systems of the target and the native languages.

**Research Question:**

What is the impact of translation practices on the Saudi Male EFL learner’s vocabulary size?

**Background**

*Translation as a pedagogical tool*

English language learning and translation have long been interrelated though debated (Malmkjær, 1998; Cook, 2010). Translation gained its momentum as a language learning tool by using the famous grammar-translation method (GTM) in language teaching (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). This was later criticised and addressed with less impact in improving learners’ language proficiency. The claim was that using translation allows learners to use their first language and thus keeps them mentally attached to it within the English language learning context, which prevents the acquisition of the English language (Carreres, 2007, Korošec, 2010, Malmkjær, 1998, Newson, 1988, Vermes, 2010, Zojer, 2004). Therefore, translation was replaced with more communication-
based teaching approaches and methods to be used in isolation from the learners’ first language.

However, the last decade witnessed the rise of translation in English as a foreign language learning context. On one hand, linguists suggested that learning a second language can be more efficient if linked to learners’ first language (Cook, 2010). Other scholars suggest that translation in language learning contexts in general and classrooms, in particular, is an added value to the learning process (Cook, 2010; Laviosa, 2014; Pym, Malmkjær & Gutiérrez, 2013). For instance, Navidinia, Akar & Hendevalan (2015), in their study about the impact of translation in language learning concluded that its advantages are more than the claimed disadvantages. Moreover, Pym (2013:135) suggests that “translation is a communicative activity that can enhance the learning of an L3”.

The trend favouring translation continues with recent research that shed light on the role of machine translation (MT) practices and activities in language learning (Jolley & Maimone, 2017). The authors strongly recommend the use and highlight the importance of MT practices in promoting the language learning process and, specifically, L3 writing. Similarly, Gutiérrez (2018:15) states “the scholarly work around translation in language teaching through various interdisciplinary foci reveals translation and the use of L1/L3 in the classroom as a holistic concept that comprises complex processes which activate different purposes and mechanisms”. Further, Alqurashi (2013) found that determination strategies, including using monolingual or bilingual dictionaries and inferring meaning from context, showed the highest contribution to the learning process. Moreover, in favor of translation benefits in L3 learning is the notion of ‘linguistic mediation’. The acknowledgement of the Council of Europe of translation as they expanded this concept of linguistic mediation to include cultural, social and pedagogical levels to be integrated in the CEFR (REF).

Vocabulary knowledge has long been acknowledged as a proxy for successful second language (L3) acquisition. Similarly, in the EFL context, vocabulary knowledge is addressed as an indicator of learning.
The size of learners’ vocabulary knowledge determines the probability of learning an L³. A number of studies have shown that L³ vocabulary knowledge is strongly associated with performance in various language skills (e.g., Masrai, 2006; Milton, 2009; Nation, 2007; Staehr, 2008; van Zeeland & Schmitt, 2013). As discussed above, vocabulary size is used as a central dimension in explorations of lexical proficiency. However, considering that vocabulary knowledge is the key to all language aspects, the current study uses vocabulary size to indicate L³ proficiency.

**Vocabulary Knowledge and Language Learning**

Measuring L³ vocabulary size has long attracted the attention of language teachers and researchers. Knowing learners’ receptive vocabulary size offers language teachers gauge whether those learners can perform well in a given task, i.e., understand a written text or a spoken discourse.

Various scholars have noted the influence of lexical knowledge on the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). Most of these studies focus on reading skills (e.g. Laufer 1992; Ouellette 2006; Qian 1999, 2007). Schmitt et al. (2011, p. 35) argue that “there is a fairly straightforward linear relationship between growth in vocabulary knowledge for a text and comprehension of that text”. In line with this, Stæhr (2008) found a stronger relationship between vocabulary size and reading skills than vocabulary size and writing or listening skills. In terms of speaking skills, Koizumi and In’nami (2013) concluded that vocabulary knowledge played a significant role in learners’ speaking proficiency in terms of both breadth and depth.

Research studies suggest certain thresholds of vocabulary knowledge that L³ learners need to master before they are able to successfully comprehend or use the language. Nation (2001), for instance, reported that knowledge of the 2,000 most frequent word families enables learners to understand about 67% of the words in a written text and 43% of the words in spoken discourse. Researchers, including Nation (2001) argue that L³ learners need to possess knowledge far greater than the 2,000 most frequent words to function well in various language skills. Nation (2001) suggests that learners need between 2,000-3,000 word families to read unsimplified English texts and 3,000-4,000 word families to
understand the spoken text. Laufer and Ravenhorst-Kalovsky (2010) suggest minimal and optimal coverages for reading comprehension. The minimal coverage figure of 95%, which they suggest would not satisfy most educators, requires knowledge of about 4,500-5,000 word families. The optimal coverage of 98%, on the other hand, is needed for better comprehension associated with ‘functional independence in reading’ (p. 32). This optimal coverage requires knowledge of about 8,000-word families, supporting that proposed by Nation (2002).

Various tools were designed and applied to estimate learners’ vocabulary knowledge. For instance, the most commonly used tool is yes/no responses to the L* words. Alsaif (2011) and Alahmadi (2010) found a statistically significant positive relationship between the strategy of guessing a word’s meaning from the context provided and the breadth of English vocabulary knowledge in Saudi participants across various educational levels.

Webb (2007) argues that providing L1 translation of L* target items is sought to provide more accurate estimates of L* learners’ vocabulary knowledge than do multiple-choice and checklists. The current research study, therefore, was designed to adopt this approach. That is, learners’ vocabulary knowledge is only measured by providing the translation of the L* words. Following this approach prevent the guessing possibility among test takers.

Therefore, the current study aims to investigate the role of translation in promoting L* learning. Precisely, the study uses various translation practices as a tool to enhance learners’ vocabulary knowledge. That is, vocabulary knowledge is used in the study as an indicator of L* learning.

**Methodology**

The present study's focus is to explore the role of translation practice activities in enhancing learners’ English language skills. Learners’ vocabulary size was used as the learning indicator, whereas translation competencies were the focus of the learning process. The study attempted to measure the participants’ vocabulary size before and after the learning process. Measured vocabulary size was measured in relation to the most
frequent 3,000-word in English as it is assumed as the minimum requirement for simple conversation (Milton, 2009). Moreover, other language skills were shed light on i.e. accurate use of English grammar, structure and range and appropriate use of vocabulary.

**Tools of the study**

Two parallel versions of a vocabulary size test were used to measure learners’ vocabulary size, and 1/2 two-hours translation classes focusing on various translation competencies.

**Vocabulary Size Test**

The two versions of the test each comprised 400 words in total, 300 for each of the three 1000-word frequency bands. In this vocabulary size test, the L3 forms of the target words cued responses in the L1 language. For example, participants were required to write the Arabic translations of “political”, “consumer”, and “scientific” in blank cells in a table next to each printed L3 word.

All the responses were scored by the author and another Arabic native speaker to enable testing of inter-rater reliability. Responses were scored at two levels, “sensitive” and “strict”. In the “sensitive” scoring system, responses that demonstrated knowledge of L1 meaning were marked as correct even if they were misspelled and/or provided in the wrong grammatical form. In the strict scoring system, a participant’s response was marked correct if it demonstrated that the participant was able to recall the L1 meaning the word was spelled correctly and it was provided in the correct grammatical form. Both raters agreed that the translation provided demonstrated L1 knowledge of the target L3 words according to the two scoring systems. The “sensitive” scoring system was designed to elicit partial knowledge of the target words, while the strict scoring was designed to demonstrate the participant’s full knowledge of the target words. This provided an estimate of the number of words known by each participant out of a 3,000-word target vocabulary. The total vocabulary size estimate of a test-taker is calculated by multiplying the number of correct responses by 3.33 to arrive at an estimate out of 3,000-word
knowledge. For example, if a test taker’s total response is 20, his/her estimated vocabulary size would be around 222.

**Translation Practice Activities**

On the other hand, translation practice activities were delivered within a 14-weeks semester. Objectives of the course were to train students on various translation competencies. These include enhancing learners’ knowledge of the language industry and professions, ability to produce 100% translation quality, promoting knowledge about the interlingua cultural differences and ability to perform complex translation projects. Other sub-competencies included text analysis in the source and target languages, pre-editing the source text and post-editing the translation version, back translation, and developing personal terminology index. Learners were intensively exposed to translation practice by following different teaching approaches and learning strategies in which learners were asked to translate from English into Arabic and from Arabic into English in each of the 14 classes.

**Procedure**

The two versions of the vocabulary size test (A and B) were administered twice to undergraduate students majoring in English Language studies as pre and post-learning tests as part of a translation course curriculum. Participants (n=40) were given as much time as needed to complete the tests. The task was clearly explained to the participants by the tests’ administrators and participants were advised that they could withdraw from the test at any time without any obligation. Between the pre and post-tests, translation classes were delivered to achieve the preset learning outcomes for the translation course.

**Results and Discussion:**

*Learners’ Vocabulary Size: Status and Implications*

A vocabulary size pre-test was used to determine the impact of translation teaching practices on vocabulary size. A pre-test was run in order to
measure the learners’ vocabulary size at the beginning of the course in order to pinpoint any significant differences as a result of the applied translation learning and teaching methods. The pre-test and post-test results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RVS_sen_pre</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>222.2</td>
<td>3222.2</td>
<td>1911.222</td>
<td>850.5105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RVS_str_pre</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>322.0</td>
<td>3322.0</td>
<td>1313.922</td>
<td>818.3390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RVS_sen_post</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>011.1</td>
<td>3222.2</td>
<td>1192.221</td>
<td>282.9213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RVS_str_post</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>222.0</td>
<td>3122.2</td>
<td>1200.921</td>
<td>333.430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valid N (listwise)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The minimum score recorded in the vocabulary size pre-test following the sensitive marking is 222.2 words, while the maximum score recorded is 3222.2. The mean score recorded following the sensitive marking procedure is 1911.222 words. On the other hand, following the strict marking procedure learners’ minimum score is 322.0 and the maximum score is 3322.0, and the mean score is 1313.92 words. Similarly, the minimum score recorded in the post-test following the sensitive marking procedure is 011.1 words, while the maximum score recorded is 3222.2 words, and the mean score is 1192.221 words. Following the strict marking procedure, the minimum score recorded by the learners is 222.0, while the maximum score is 3122.2, and the mean score is 1200.921 words.

The above-reported results show that learners' vocabulary size increased between the two tests. Moreover, results also revealed a variance in the learners’ vocabulary size between the sensitive marking and strict marking. That is, when spelling and structure are considered, learners’ scores were a bit lower. Nevertheless, to point out the differences...
between the pre and post-tests results, the results were analysed using the paired sample t test.

Table 7: Paired Sample Test: Sensitive pre-test and Strict pre-test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Paired Differences</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
<th>Lower</th>
<th>Upper</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pair 1 RVS_sen_pre - RVS_str_pre</td>
<td>199.1665</td>
<td>12.2690</td>
<td>12.7430</td>
<td>174.137</td>
<td>224.195</td>
<td>16.096</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

First, the difference between the mean scores of the sensitive pre-test and the strict pre-test results is reported. As shown in Table 7, a paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare learners’ vocabulary size scores in the sensitive and strict marking procedures. There was a significant difference in the sensitive marking (M=1401.665, SD=450.5) and strict marking (M=1207.499, SD=418.339) conditions; t(39)=-16.096, p = .000. These results suggest that learners’ scores are decreased when strict marking is applied. Specifically, our results suggest that learners achieve lower scores when spelling and structure are considered.

Table 7: Paired Sample Test: Sensitive pre-test and Sensitive post-test
Second, the difference between the mean scores of the sensitive pre-test and the sensitive post-test results is reported. As shown in Table 3, there was a significant difference in the sensitive marking (M=1911.222, SD=192.212) and strict marking (M=1192.212, SD=222.922) conditions; t(22)=-33.133, p = 1.111. These results suggest that learners’ scores are improved after using translation practice as a language learning tool, when sensitive marking is applied.

Table 4: Paired Sample Test: Strict pre-test and Strict post-test

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pair</th>
<th>Paired Differences</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Std. Error Mean</th>
<th>Lower</th>
<th>Upper</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Sig (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Third, the difference between the mean scores of the strict pre-test and the strict post-test results are reported. As shown in Table 4, there was a significant difference in the strict marking of the pre-test (M=12.042, SD=3.1839) and strict marking of the post-test (M=17.48, SD=5.30.461) conditions; t(39)=14.81, p = .000. These results suggest that learners’ scores improve after using translation practice as a language learning tool when strict marking is applied.

Due to the fact that participants were undergraduate learners who majored in English language studies, the overall results indicate that learners were underscored in the pre-vocabulary size test. Further, the significant variance between the sensitive and strict mean scores indicates that learners’ language proficiency is below average. Thus, it was assumed that the course would be challenging for the learners.

On the other hand, the results of the post-test showed an increase in the learners’ vocabulary size. Post-test results showed that the applied translation learning and teaching strategies impacted increasing learners’ vocabulary size and promoted their English language skills.

Translation activities and Language Assessment

The course started with designated learning outcomes that both the lecturer and learners aspire to achieving. The main objective of the course was to enhance learners’ translation competencies. This includes, as mentioned previously, enhancing learners’ knowledge of the language industry and professions, ability to produce accurate and quality translation, promoting knowledge about the language-related intercultural differences and ability to perform advanced translation projects. Other sub-competencies included text analysis in both the source and target languages, pre-editing the source text and post-editing of the translation version, back translation and developing personal terminology index.

Twofold interrelated assessment procedures were followed to measure the achievement of these learning outcomes throughout the course. First, the summative assessment which is the primary assessment method in the course and represents 70% of the course weight. It includes one mid-term test 30% and a final exam of 40%. Learners’ end of the course results showed that the average score of the course results was around 70 out
of 100, whereas the passing score is 60. It is worth noting that none of the learners failed the course. Figure 1 below shows the distribution of the results.

![End of Course Results](image)

**Figure 1: End of course results**

End-of-course results show that most of the learners passed the course around the 80s, which suggests that this group of learners struggled during the course. On the other hand, 15% of the learners scored above 90, and 37% were around the 80s. Achievement of those learners is described as very good and excellent. The last group of learners were around 70s and represent 25% of the total number of learners. Achievement of this group is described as good.

Second, learners’ translation activities were marked with a focus on the learning outcomes targeted in each translation activity. The weight of these activities is 21% of the course total score. However, in this type of assessment, the focus was instead paid to enhancing learners’ translation competencies by giving them frequent feedback on their translation. The feedback included accuracy and completeness of translation, appropriate and wide use of terminology and accuracy of grammar and syntax of the translation, in addition to the other previously mentioned translation sub-competences. In general, this type of assessment revealed good progress with regard to the targeted learning outcomes.

Results of the pre- vocabulary size test indicated that learners were somehow short at the beginning of the course in terms of vocabulary size.
This shortage may have an impact on achieving the course goals. However, the post-vocabulary size test results encountered good progress among the learners in terms of their vocabulary size. Additionally, progress was also monitored in learners’ use of English language grammar and structure in which, towards the end of the semester, learners used more complicated sentences accurately. Moreover, the exposure to various texts during the semester equipped learners with a new ranged amount of terminology. This was clearly represented in their in-class translation as well as in their exams.

**Conclusion:**

In conclusion, this research emphasizes the importance of translation activities in assisting learners in acquiring, developing, and strengthening their English language knowledge and skill in general and vocabulary knowledge in particular. Students learn to speak in and out of the foreign language via translation exercises. If students are encouraged to apply their translation abilities effectively, they may get the most out of their studies. The study's findings suggest that translation aided learners in promoting and improving their L². The research indicates that translation might be a valuable tool for EFL instructors and highlights its benefits. Furthermore, the study's results show that translation is a valuable and helpful tool for expanding one's vocabulary, which will, in turn, improve one's translation abilities and skills.
References:


