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

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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 (٢٠١٣) that emphasises the role of translation in L٢ 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 L٢. 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, ٢٠٠٢). 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, ٢٠٠٢, p.٤٠٩). 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 (٢٠٠٠) 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 (Malmkjaer, ١٩٩٨; Cook, ٢٠١٠). Translation gained its momentum as a language learning tool by using the famous grammar-translation method (GTM) in language teaching (Richards and Rodgers, ٢٠٠١). 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, ٢٠٠٦, Korošec, ٢٠١٥, Malmkjær, ١٩٩٨, Newson, ١٩٨٨, Vermes, ٢٠١٠, Zojer, ٢٠٠٩). 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 ٢٠١٠). Other scholars suggest that translation in language learning contexts in general and classrooms, in particular, is an added value to the learning process (Cook, ٢٠١٠; Laviosa, ٢٠١٤; Pym, Malmkjær & Gutiérrez, ٢٠١٣). For instance, Navidinia, Akar & Hendevalan (٢٠١٩), in their study about the impact of translation in language learning concluded that its advantages are more than the claimed disadvantages. Moreover, Pym (٢٠١٣:١٣٥) suggests that "translation is a communicative activity that can enhance the learning of an L٢".

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, ٢٠٢٢). The authors strongly recommend the use and highlight the importance of MT practices in promoting the language learning process and, specifically, L٢ writing. Similarly, Gutiérrez (٢٠١٨:١٥) states "the scholarly work around translation in language teaching through various interdisciplinary foci reveals translation and the use of L١/L٢ in the classroom as a holistic concept that comprises complex processes which activate different purposes and mechanisms". Further, Alqurashi (٢٠١٣) 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 L٢ 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 (L٢) 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 L٢. A number of studies have shown that L٢ vocabulary knowledge is strongly associated with performance in various language skills (e.g., Masrai, ٢٠٠٩; Milton, ٢٠٠٩; Nation, ٢٠٠٦; Staehr, ٢٠٠٨; van Zeeland & Schmitt, ٢٠١٣). 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 L٢ proficiency.

Vocabulary Knowledge and Language Learning

Measuring L٢ 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 ١٩٩٢; Ouellette ٢٠٠٦; Qian ١٩٩٩, ٢٠٠٢). Schmitt et al. (٢٠١١, p. ٣٩) 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 (٢٠٠٨) 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 (٢٠١٣) 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 L٢ learners need to master before they are able to successfully comprehend or use the language. Nation (٢٠٠١), for instance, reported that knowledge of the ٢,٠٠٠ most frequent word families enables learners to understand about ٨٢٪ of the words in a written text and ٩٠٪ of the words in spoken discourse. Researchers, including Nation (٢٠٠٦) argue that L٢ learners need to possess knowledge far greater than the ٢,٠٠٠ most frequent words to function well in various language skills. Nation (٢٠٠٦) suggests that learners need between ٨,٠٠٠-٩,٠٠٠ word families to read unsimplified English texts and ٦,٠٠٠-٧,٠٠٠ word families to

understand the spoken text. Laufer and Ravenhorst-Kalovsky (٢٠١٠) suggest minimal and optimal coverages for reading comprehension. The minimal coverage figure of ٩٥٪, which they suggest would not satisfy most educators, requires knowledge of about ٤,٠٠٠-٥,٠٠٠ word families. The optimal coverage of ٩٨٪, on the other hand, is needed for better comprehension associated with 'functional independence in reading' (p. ٢٥). This optimal coverage requires knowledge of about ٨,٠٠٠-word families, supporting that proposed by Nation (٢٠٠٦).

Various tools were designed and applied to estimate learners' vocabulary knowledge. For instance, the most commonly used tool is yes/no responses to the L٢ words. Alsaif (٢٠١١) and Alahmadi (٢٠١٥) 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 (٢٠٠٧) argues that providing L١ translation of L٢ target items is sought to provide more accurate estimates of L٢ 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 L٢ words. Following this approach prevent the guessing possibility among test takers.

Therefore, the current study aims to investigate the role of translation in promoting L٢ 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 L٢ 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 ٣٠٠٠-word in English as it is assumed as the minimum requirement for simple conversation (Milton, ٢٠٠٩). 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 ١٤ two-hours translation classes focusing on various translation competencies.

Vocabulary Size Test

The two versions of the test each comprised ٩٠ words in total, ٣٠ for each of the three ١,٠٠٠-word frequency bands. In this vocabulary size test, the L٢ forms of the target words cued responses in the L١ 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 L٢ 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 L١ 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 L١ meaning the word was spelled correctly and it was provided in the correct grammatical form. Both raters agreed that the translation provided demonstrated L١ knowledge of the target L٢ 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 ٣,٠٠٠-word target vocabulary. The total vocabulary size estimate of a test-taker is calculated by multiplying the number of correct responses by ٣٣.٣٣٣٣ to arrive at an estimate out of ٣,٠٠٠-word

knowledge. For example, if a test taker's total response is ٢٠, his/her estimated vocabulary size would be around ٦٦٦.

Translation Practice Activities

On the other hand, translation practice activities were delivered within a ١٤-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 ١٠٠٪ 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 ١٤ 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 ($n=٤٠$) 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 ١.

Table ١: Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
RVS_sen_pre	٤٠	٥٣٣.٣	٢٥٣٣.٣	١٤٠١.٦٦٥	٤٥٠.٥١٠٥
RVS_str_pre	٤٠	٤٦٦.٧	٢٢٦٦.٧	١٢٠٢.٤٩٩	٤١٨.٣٣٩٠
RVS_sen_post	٤٠	٧٠٠.٠	٢٩٣٣.٣	١٨٤٩.٩٩٨	٥٣٣.٤٩٣٠
RVS_str_post	٤٠	٥٦٦.٧	٢٨٣٣.٣	١٦٧٧.٤٩٨	٥٣٠.٤٦١٢
Valid N (listwise)	٤٠				

The minimum score recorded in the vocabulary size pre-test following the sensitive marking is ٥٣٣.٣ words, while the maximum score recorded is ٢٥٣٣.٣. The mean score recorded following the sensitive marking procedure is ١٤٠١.٦٦٥ words. On the other hand, following the strict marking procedure learners' minimum score is ٤٦٦.٧ and the maximum score is ٢٢٦٦.٧, and the mean score is ١٢٠٢.٤٩ words. Similarly, the minimum score recorded in the post-test following the sensitive marking procedure is ٧٠٠ words, while the maximum score recorded is ٢٩٣٣.٣ words, and the mean score is ١٨٤٩.٩٩٨ words. Following the strict marking procedure, the minimum score recorded by the learners is ٥٦٦.٧, while the maximum score is ٢٨٣٣.٣, and the mean score is ١٦٧٧.٤٩٨ 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 ٢: Paired Sample Test: Sensitive pre-test and Strict pre-test

					٩٥٪ Confidence Interval of the Difference				
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig (٢-tailed)
Pair ١	RVS_sen_pre - RVS_str_pre	١٩٩.١٦٦٥	٧٨.٢٦٠٠	١٢.٣٧٤٠	١٧٤.١٣٧	٢٢٤.١٩٥	١٦.٠٩٦	٣٩	.٠٠٠

First, the difference between the mean scores of the sensitive pre-test and the strict pre-test results is reported. As shown in Table ٢, 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=١٤٠١.٦٦٥, SD=٤٥٠.٥) and strict marking (M=١٢٠٢.٤٩٩, SD=٤١٨.٣٣٩) conditions; t(٣٩)=-١٦.٠٩٦, p = ٠.٠٠٠. 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 ٣: Paired Sample Test: Sensitive pre-test and Sensitive post-test

					٩٥٪ Confidence Interval of the Difference				

		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig (٢-tailed)
Pair ١	RVS_sen_pre - RVS_sen_post	-٤٤٨.٣٣٣	١٢٨.٧٥٧	٢٠.٣٥٨	-٤٨٩.٥١١	-٤٠٧.١٥٥	-٢٢.٠٢٢	٣٩	.٠٠٠

Second, the difference between the mean scores of the sensitive pre-test and the sensitive post-test results is reported. As shown in Table ٣, there was a significant difference in the sensitive marking (M=١٤٠١.٦٦٥, SD=٤٥٠.٥) and strict marking (M=١٨٤٩.٩٩٨, SD=٥٣٣.٤٩٣) conditions; t(٣٩)=-٢٢.٠٢٢, p = ٠.٠٠٠. These results suggest that learners' scores are improved after using translation practice as a language learning tool, when sensitive marking is applied.

Table ٤: Paired Sample Test: Strict pre-test and Strict post-test

Paired Differences									
					٩٥٪ Confidence Interval of the Difference				
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig (٢-tailed)
Pair ١	RVS_str_pre - RVS_str_post	-٤٧٤.٩٩٩	١٧٠.٠٩٤	٢٦.٩٧٣	-٥٢٩.٥٥٨	-٤٢٠.٤٤٠	-١٧.٦١	٣٩	.٠٠٠

Third, the difference between the mean scores of the strict pre-test and the strict post-test results are reported. As shown in Table ٤, there was a significant difference in the strict marking of the pre-test (M=١٢٠٢.٤٩٩, SD=٤١٨.٣٣٩) and strict marking of the post-test (M=١٦٧٧.٤٩٨, SD=٥٣٠.٤٦١) conditions; t(٣٩)=١٧.٦١, p = ٠.٠٠٠. 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 ٧٠ % of the course weight. It includes one mid-term test ٣٠٪ and a final exam of ٤٠٪. Learners' end of the course results showed that the average score of the course results was around ٧٥.٥ out

of ١٠٠, whereas the passing score is ٦٠. It is worth noting that none of the learners failed the course. Figure ١ below shows the distribution of the results.
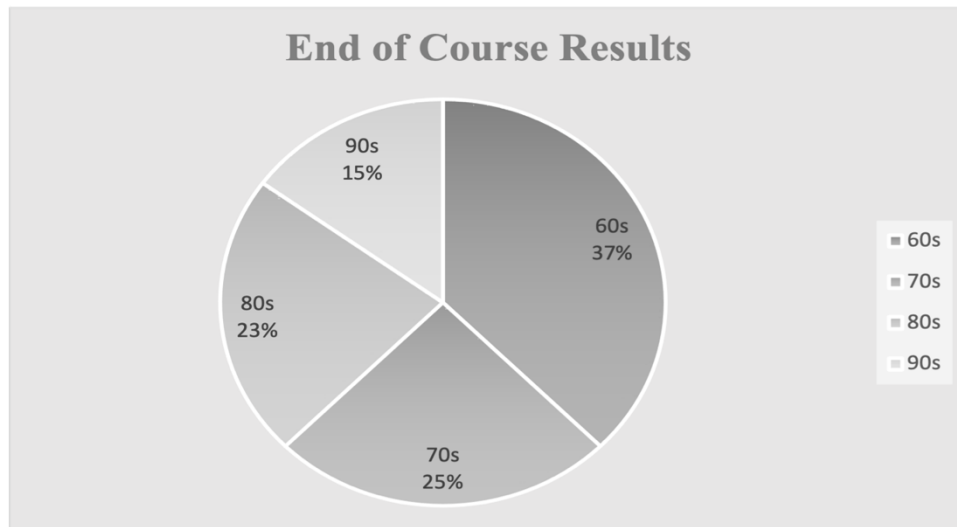

Figure ١: End of course results

End-of-course results show that most of the learners passed the course around the ٦٠s, which suggests that this group of learners struggled during the course. On the other hand, ١٥٪ of the learners scored above ٩٠, and ٢٣٪ were around the ٨٠s. Achievement of those learners is described as very good and excellent. The last group of learners were around ٧٠s and represent ٢٥٪ 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 ٣٠٪ 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 LΥ. 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.

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