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The Iranian EFL teachers’ perceptions on translation strategy use

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Abstract

The use of translation in learning a foreign language can be ignored by language teachers, but translation is widely used throughout learners’ learning process. The present study, therefore, attempted to explore Iranian EFL teachers’ perceptions on translation strategy use. The content analysis of the participants’ qualitative reports indicated that the Iranian EFL teachers held different perceptions on the role of translation in their learning and teaching experiences, as well as their academic studies and translation/interpretation practice. Moreover, the interviewees provided interesting insights in relation to effective translation/interpretation.

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1. Introduction

Translation, in addition to transferring meanings and conveying messages, can also be employed as a strategy for learning foreign languages. Chamot (1987) defined the translation strategy as “using the first language as a base for understanding and/or producing the second language” (p. 77). In the present paper translation, in addition to its traditional sense, refers to the use of one’s first tongue for learning a second language.

Most theoretical works and practical methods in ELT indicate that use of translation as a strategy in learning a second language should be prohibited. However, some scholars believe that translation has extensively been used by EFL learners as a strategy of learning a second language. According to V. Cook

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(1992) almost all second language learners access their first language while processing L2. Thus, some may argue that translation can be a source of transfer which would lead to interference. But Beardsmore (1993) believed that maintaining and developing one’s native language does not interfere with the development of the second language acquisition. The use of students’ mother tongue, according to Auerbach (1993), may also increase their openness to learning by reducing the degree of language and culture shock they encounter. In fact, the practitioners should not upset the balance by overuse of any of the two languages. In this regard, Turnbull (2001) contended that although a quick switch to L1 ensures whether students have mastered difficult grammatical concepts or unfamiliar words, it is essential for teachers to use the target language as much as possible in contexts in which students have a limited access to the target language outside the classroom.

It is noteworthy that very little attention has been paid to teachers’ perspectives, that is to say, teachers’ personal beliefs regarding translation use in second language teaching/learning. In this regard, Malmkjær (1998) stated “the issue of the use of translation in language teaching is one on which most language teachers have a view” (p. 1). Thus, the present study attempted to explore Iranian EFL teachers’ beliefs about the role of translation in language learning in general, and specifically beliefs related to their own English language learning, teaching experiences, as well as their academic studies and translation/interpretation practice.

2. Method

Purposeful sampling – through which individuals can provide rich and varied insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Dörnyei, 2007) – was used to select the participants for the present study. All of the participants, experienced English language instructors with over eight years of professional practice gave their written consent to participate in the study. Moreover, all the participants were engaged in post graduate studies in ELT at Eastern Mediterranean University in North Cyprus and Iran. Four of the participants were male, and five female, between the ages of 28 to 45.

The present study was a qualitative study of the Iranian EFL teachers’ perceptions of the role of translation strategy. The data were collected through a semi-structured interview developed by the researcher, it included a set of open-ended questions to elicit teachers’ beliefs on the use of translation in language learning, teaching, academic studies as well as translation/interpretation practice. Open-ended interview questions in applied linguistic research are most common in that through these the interviewer provides “guidance and direction (hence the ‘structured’ part in the name), but is also keen to follow up interesting developments and to let the interviewee elaborate on certain issues (hence the ‘semi-’ part)” (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 136).

3. Data analysis

Since the data were collected through a semi-structured interview, the participants’ qualititative reports were content analyzed. Content analysis involved “identifying, coding, categorizing, classifying and labelling” the basic patterns and themes of qualitative data elicited from the participants (Patton, 2002, p. 463). Initially, the participants’ responses to the interview guide were analyzed, systematically coded, and categorized in terms of the emerging patterns or themes. After establishing the list of the emerging themes from the interview content, the qualitative data were further classified in terms of the subthemes. Overall, the content analysis of the interview data identified three major emerging themes: teacher/teaching, learner/learning, and translation with their specific sub-themes.

4. Results
The content analysis of the teachers’ interview responses revealed ‘teachers/teaching’ as one of the main themes, with L1 use in the classroom, L2 (English) use in the classroom, and teachers’ reasons for language use (L1/L2) as its three respective subthemes.

Generally, in relation to the subthemes of ‘L1 use in the classroom’ and ‘L2 use in the classroom’, the participants described the potential reasons for teachers’ use of L1 and/or L2 in the Iranian EFL environment based on their own past and present professional experiences. Overall, the teachers were negative about using L1 in their language classes and supported the use of L2 instead. In relation to the subtheme of ‘teachers’ reasons for language use’, the interviewees pointed out to those factors that would affect students’ preference for using L1 and/or L2.

The teachers mostly believed that the type of dictionary—bilingual or monolingual—used by learners could cause significant changes in the language learners’ choice whether to use translation for language learning or not.

One of the most significant perspectives was that teachers’ reason for L1 use in their classroom is due to the lack of equivalence as one of the participants reported the following:

Mainly in the cases that there is no similarity between English and Persian structure, i.e. in the cases we face lack of equivalents, I inevitably use Persian language. (Teacher 4)

The second major reason for the teachers’ resorting to the students’ first language is in the case of teaching complicated grammatical points. One of the teachers held the idea that:

Some grammar points are considered to be problematic and complicated if taught in English only, and that’s why the teachers are left with no other choice but to bring some equivalent examples in learners’ language to make it more comprehensible. (Teacher 3)

Another popular view among the participants was that the mother tongue should be use at lower proficiency levels. As one of the interviewee suggested:

Young students sometimes need extra attention which cannot be supported by a second language but after their improvement this attention can be paid in English as well. (Teacher 6)

Finally, lack of teachers’ proficiency in the target language is identified as a reason for switching into students’ mother tongue. One of the teachers believed that:

There are some teachers who are not qualified enough to use English fluently. So, they mostly use Persian to cover up their deficiency and incomplete knowledge of language use. (Teacher 8)

In relation to the final subtheme of ‘teachers’ reasons for language use (L1/L2)’ the participants mostly preferred the use of monolingual dictionaries over bilingual dictionaries. They were negative about using a bilingual dictionary and recommended learners to use a monolingual dictionary as three of them emphasized using monolingual dictionaries helps students to increase their knowledge of vocabulary.

The second major theme emerging in the content analysis was ‘learners/learning’, with its subthemes of L1 use in the classroom, L2 (English) use in the classroom, progress, and preference.

In the first and second subthemes of ‘L1 use in the classroom’ and ‘L2 (English) use in the classroom’ the interviewees generally highlighted how language learners might benefit from using L1 and/or L2 in their learning experiences. The participants’ views on the developing habits of language
learners appeared under the subtheme of ‘progress’. Overall, the participants’ insights reflected their beliefs that language learners gradually become more target language-oriented. Additionally, suggestions made by some of the teachers regarding the use of translation in language learning have been represented in data related to the subtheme of ‘preference’. In this part, some of the interviewees drew on their personal teaching experience.

As regards the subtheme of ‘L1 use in the classroom’ five of the participants shared that the use of students’ mother tongue is helpful for understanding grammar. One of the participants stated that:

I believe that teachers should resort to the students’ first language when dealing with grammar. This helps teacher to save both time and make sure that learners have fully mastered the content of their grammar lessons. (Teacher 1)

Two of the interviewees believed that L1 should be used at elementary levels. As one of them pointed out:

I use L1 at the elementary levels of learning English. Considering the fact that some grammatical tenses seem really difficult and complicated to elementary students, it was mostly helpful to me. For instance, learning ‘present perfect’ tense could not be feasible without translation into Persian. (Teacher 3)

In this regard, the most widely held view among the teachers was that the use of L2 in the classroom could be very helpful. One teacher shared the following:

I myself found the use of L2 very helpful since when we think in English and try to use a definition instead of translation, the domain of vocabulary increases in a long term. (Teacher 5)

Two other teachers believed that L2 might not be helpful for lower proficiency levels. This is how one of them put it:

Using Persian actually happens on lower levels of proficiency of students, because in higher levels the teacher can explain the terms in English and using L2 is more helpful. (Teacher 4)

In relation to the subtheme of ‘progress’, abandoning use of L1 appeared as the most common belief among the participants. One of the interviewees shared:

I observed that more proficient students would like to use English in the classroom. It correlates directly with their level of proficiency. (Teacher 8)

The remaining three significant views were that learners ‘become users of monolingual dictionaries’, ‘more confident to benefit from L2’, and ‘develop the habit of thinking in English’. Regarding learners’ reliance on the type of dictionary use one of the teachers believed that:

It is generally expected that learners’ reliance on bilingual dictionaries decreases as their knowledge of L2 develops. One reason for this is that learners will be better able to understand the definitions and illustrations given in monolingual dictionaries once they have become sufficiently competent in L2. (Teacher 1)
In relation to the subtheme of ‘preference’ some teachers suggested that language learners ought to use translation (L1) as well as bi-directional translation exercises. Further, one of them believed that it is very much helpful for language learners to develop a sizeable repertoire of functional phrases, expressions, and sentences with their equivalents in both their NL and TL.

The final theme, identified in the data analysis, was ‘translation’, with its subthemes of accuracy, feasibility, appropriateness, equivalence, machine translation, the effect of translation on learning, translation strategies, factors in translation/interpretation, and word-for-word translation.

The teachers reflected different opinions in relation to the three subthemes of ‘accuracy’, ‘feasibility’, and ‘appropriateness’. The most significant view among the participants was that an accurate, feasible, and appropriate translation would be possible through multiple revisions. Accordingly, one of the teachers held that:

An accurate, feasible, and appropriate translation has to be congruent with the context, and it needs to be revised several times to get closer and closer to the intended meaning. (Teacher 9)

In relation to the subtheme of ‘equivalence’, the participants mentioned different criteria which have to be taken into consideration for equivalency in translation. However, the most salient insight was that a translator/interpreter should be familiar with the source and target language literature and culture to be able to reach an equivalent effect in his/her endeavor. One of the interviewees stated the following:

A translator or interpreter should know both languages’ culture the same; should have ability in switching from one to another with less difficulty. (Teacher 8)

The overall view in relation to the subtheme of ‘machine translation’ was that this translation technology can’t take the place of a human translator due to the fact that translation is an art and a machine translator is not intelligent enough to translate as its human counterparts do. As an example, a participant believed that:

In machine translation a computer program analyses a text and produces a text without human involvement. It can be helpful when machine translation involves editing by human. Without human intervention machine translation can only give a rough translation which optimistically can give the gist of the text. Texts with limited ranges of vocabulary and simple structure do not need so much human intervention. (Teacher 9)

The majority of the interviewees held the view that sometimes and at certain levels translation helps the process of language learning, as reflected in the insights represented under the subtheme of ‘the effect of translation on learning’. Two of them also pointed out translation from Persian to English could be more challenging for language learners. One of the teachers shared his learning experience using translation as follows:

I have been collecting ‘interesting’ and ‘useful’ sentences and their original translations for many years. I have found the experience very rewarding and have usually advised my students to develop their own collections. (Teacher 2)
In relation to the subthemes of ‘translation strategy’, and ‘factors in translation/interpretation’ the teachers shared their opinions on the type of strategy as well as factors that should be taken into consideration in translation respectively. In the latter case four of them emphasized the conveyance of message as an indispensable part in translation. As one of them noted:

The most important factor in oral translation is conveying the message and the tone. In written translation as well, along with the content, the style should be preserved, too. (Teacher 4)

Regarding ‘word-for-word translation’ as the final subtheme, the majority of the participants did not find it helpful for language learning; however, some believed that it is inevitable and helpful at lower proficiency levels. As one of the participants put it:

Word for word translation is inevitable at beginner levels. Therefore, it is important that learners be made aware of the pitfalls and shortcomings of such translation. (Teacher 1)

5. Discussion and conclusion

In this study, the interview data were interpreted in order to explore the Iranian English language teachers’ views about use of translation as a learning strategy. The participants’ beliefs related to the emerging themes of ‘teacher/teaching’, ‘learner/learning’, and ‘translation’ suggested several issues which will be discussed below.

In relation to the first theme, the data seem to indicate that less proficient learners and/or teachers with traditional training may use L1 in mainstream and government institutions. Similarly, for students of lower levels and for grammar instruction teachers may resort to students’ first language. Lack of equivalence in the source language and existence of a cultural gap among languages are cases where the use of L1 seems inevitable. Other factors such as time constraint, lack of equipment, learners’ background also play a significant role in the use of mother tongue in language teaching. The participants in the study believed that both learning and using L2 require developing students’ meta-cognitive strategies and study skills, and the teacher’s effective implementation of translation related work. Additionally, using L2 could be more appropriate for higher levels and teachers ought to encourage learners to read around the topic in L2 before embarking on Persian-English translation; and the use of L1 by teachers has to be restricted to lower levels of proficiency instead. In the case of dictionary use teachers generally believed that learners should abandon using bilingual dictionaries as they develop their L2 knowledge, and replace bilingual with monolingual dictionaries. The main reason for this perception was that language learners cannot get familiar with register, pragmatics, and usage issues through bilingual dictionaries.

In relation to the second theme, the teachers believed that learners should use L1 at lower levels; however, they should gradually stop using their first language as they get more proficient and confident users of L2. The participants’ professional experiences seem to indicate that as learners develop, they become users of monolingual resources, they better understand the definitions/illustration in L2, and develop the habit of thinking in English. As regards the last theme, the participants reported that accuracy, feasibility and appropriateness in translation could be ensured by professionals and multiple revisions. The issue of equivalence depends on factors such as the context of use in L1/L2, the register/stylistic clues and the degree of familiarity with L1/L2 culture. This means that various criteria should be taken into account by learners/translators to reach an equivalent effect.

Overall, the data entries showed that the Iranian teachers generally did not prefer translation as a strategy for language learning, which is suggested by their insights in that they prohibited the use of L1 in classroom, the use of bilingual dictionaries, as well as limited L1 use to lower proficiency levels for both
teaching and learning. It should be noted that the way teachers think and approach their profession would
directly affect their students’ learning experiences. Hence, language teachers should be more cautious
about this issue and take their students’ interests and preferences into account while introducing and
practicing instructional materials. In conclusion, the discussion whether to incorporate L1 and its culture
in L2 instruction is by no means over. Any decision in favor of translation for both teaching and learning
must take into consideration a number of factors, such as the learners’ attitudes, motivation, age and
purpose of learning a language. In addition, teachers’ perception and familiarity with the L1 language and
culture are to be taken into account. Translation as a strategy for learning and teaching can be potentially
beneficial, yet it is constrained by physical and human factors in the language learning environment.

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