

## Does Translation Contribute to Learners' Free Active Vocabulary?

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This research was conducted to find out whether or not using "translation" technique in vocabulary teaching would have any positive effects on the "free active" vocabulary of Iranian learners of English. To carry out the research, eighty-eight intermediate male and female students were chosen. The participants were divided into four "male experimental", "male control", "female experimental", and "female control" groups. The experimental groups were taught twenty English words using their L1 translations, whereas, control groups were instructed the same words using their L2 definitions. After four sessions of treatment the pupils were given a test on "free active" vocabulary, and the corresponding data were gathered. A 2×2 ANOVA was run to analyze the data. The analysis revealed that those whose instruction was through L1 translation performed better on the test than others. With regard to the nature of the test, we can assert that those who performed better had turned more of the instructed words into "free active". That is, "translation" technique helped pupils keep the words as "free active" in their minds, which in turn influenced their communicative ability.

**Key Words:** translation, vocabulary, active vocabulary, TEFL, language learning

### 1 Introduction

Although vocabulary has not always been recognized as a priority in language teaching, there is now general agreement among vocabulary specialists that lexical competence is at the very heart of communicative competence, the ability to communicate successfully and appropriately (Coady and Huckin, 1997). Moreover, there is much more to a language than, let us say, grammar, and we express what we mean by our choice of vocabulary. If you spend most of your time studying grammar your English will not improve very much. You will see the most improvement if you learn more words and expressions. You can say very little with grammar but almost anything with words (Dana Shejbalová, 2006).

However, it should be mentioned that only having a large scope of vocabulary would not be useful unless they can be used in real contexts with minimum of thought and pauses. Hence, the question of finding out effective ways for expanding learners' vocabulary that can be used in authentic situations, i.e. "uncontrolled active" or "free active vocabulary"

warrants attention. Of different methods of teaching vocabulary this article focuses on the "translation" technique.

Tajalli (2009) argues, "...we may draw a pedagogic conclusion and suggest that semantic and pragmatic translation can and must be used as a teaching device for learners who need TL as an additional medium for idiomatic communication". The main reason for including L1 while teaching and learning L2 is its facilitative role; in other words, learners should not be allowed to use their L1 whenever they prefer; rather, they ought to use it along with L2 since translation eases internalization of new words, decreases the time required for explanation of words, and provides learners with self-confidence.

## **2 Statement of the Problem**

There are different Vocabulary Teaching Techniques that one might use to teach new words. Of these techniques we can name "Illustration", "Definition", "Demonstration", "Translation", etc.

Among the above-mentioned techniques, "translation" has been a matter of controversy because it deals with the use of L1 in classroom. Some linguists such as Ur (1996) are in favor of it and assert that "translation" is a legitimate pedagogical tool especially in an EFL context and claim that it deserves to be rehabilitated. On the other hand, some like Skehan (1998) are against it and have given advice to minimize its use in language teaching settings. The present study aims at finding out the contribution of using "translation" technique to pupils' vocabulary learning in general and the extent to which the words change into "free active" in particular. In other words, this study is an effort to find out whether or not using "translation" technique can help students boost their "Free Active" vocabulary and thereby enhance their proficiency.

## **3 Purpose of the Study**

Many advanced English learners have a large "passive vocabulary", but they worry about the size of their "free active vocabulary" (Laufer, 1995). Learners of English can understand many difficult English words when reading or listening, but they do not use them in their speech or writing. This indicates that learners have a larger scope of "passive vocabulary" repertoire than "active vocabulary" in general.

Many studies have been done to determine the methods of altering "passive knowledge of vocabulary" into its "active" counterpart (Harlech-Jones, 1983; Read, 1988). In addition, a lot of research has been carried out on "active vocabulary" in general, but only a few has focused on altering words into "free active" vocabulary. This research is an effort to experiment one way of improving learners' "free active vocabulary knowledge" by exposing them to the L1 translation of the vocabulary items. In other words, this study intends to determine if exposing learners to the L1 equivalents of

## Does Translation Contribute to Learners' Vocabulary?

the words being learned has any effect on the use of those words in real contexts productively or not. Thus, the following research questions are formulated:

**RQ 1:** Does providing L1 equivalents of English words have any effect on the size of pupils' "Free Active Vocabulary"?

**RQ 2:** Does gender difference affect learners' size of Free Active Vocabulary?

### 4 Review of Literature

Translation has a very useful contribution to make in the teaching of certain groups of learners as Widdowson (2003) has suggested. Some publications have given evidence of a movement to re-assess the potential contribution which translation can make to English language teaching. Storch and Wigglesworth (2003), Kim & Elder (2008), and the valuable collection of papers edited by Titford and Hieke (1985), all reveal the methodological value of a selective and directed use of translation, particularly with respect to the development of an improved awareness of stylistic appropriateness in more advanced classes.

L1 use can enrich L2 class procedures. Widdowson (2003) believes that translation can be used to present the second language not as the acquisition of new knowledge and experience, but as an extension or alternative realization of what the learner already knows. In other words, translation can be used to help students reinforce and internalize what they have already acquired. It seems that in contemporary classrooms, there is an important role for the mother tongue to play, and its conscious use by students, orchestrated by the teacher, can lead to significant benefits in terms of the learning goals. For instance, Schmitt (1997) notes that "... a learner's L1 is one of the most important factors in learning L2 vocabulary". Similarly, it is a widespread observation that even "ideal" bilingual speakers sometimes have to draw on vocabulary from one language while speaking the other.

According to Channell (1988: 93), L1 and L2 lexicons within the same speaker are clearly linked. Titford (1983) advocates the use of first language in advanced L2 classes based on two reasons. The first reason is that it is sensible to use translation in L2 classes since learners already enjoy a well-developed feeling and knowledge of L1, which makes them learn the second language more analytically. Translation is inherently a problem-solving exercise, and it is a particularly appropriate resource for learners. The second reason is that translation, as a cognitive exercise, is well-suited to the needs of groups of learners, many of whose job opportunities will be in 'academic' areas (such as school teaching), and who will need to be able to reflect and talk about their L2 as well as communicate or talk in this L2. For this type of learner, translation clearly has an important role to play. It

may help to improve communicative potential in the L2 while at the same time providing an analytic tool for establishing where exactly the communicative norms of L2 diverge from those of the first language.

On the contrary, the tradition of discouragement of L1 use in the classroom can be phrased in stronger and weaker forms. At its strongest form, it is "Ban the L1 from the classroom". Only in circumstances where the teacher does not speak students' L1 or the students have different L1s could this be achieved. At the weakest, the rule is "Minimize the L1 in the classroom". A more optimistic version is "Maximize the L2 in the classroom" emphasizing the usefulness of the L2 rather than the harm of the first (Cook, 2001).

L1 avoidance lies behind many teaching techniques, even if it is seldom spelled out. Even writers who are less enthusiastic about avoiding the L1 take issue primarily with the extent to which this is imposed. Cohen and Macaro (2008); Duff and Polio (1990) wind up their discussion of the high variability of the L2 use in the classroom listing suggestions for enhancing the proportion of the L2 component, not for utilizing L1 component. Thus, this anti-L1 attitude was clearly a mainstream element in the twentieth century language teaching methodology (Cook, 2001).

## **5 Methodology**

One dimension of learners' lexical command which does not easily lend itself to measurement is the free active vocabulary store. It seems unfeasible to devise an instrument to check how many words a person actually uses at free will. However, several tools have been developed which estimate the lexical richness of learners' texts (Fearch, Haastrup and Phillipson 1984). The instruments which seem to be popular among researchers are the lexical variation measure, i.e. the Type/Token Ratio, and the Mean Type/Token Ratio, and the lexical sophistication measure, i.e. the Lexical Frequency Profile, which allows measuring the proportions of frequent and infrequent words in texts. These measures have been used in various studies analyzing the lexical richness of learners' essays (e.g. Laufer 1998, Laufer and Paribakht 1998). Interestingly, it has been argued that Type-Token Ratio and some other branches of this measure are subject to some pitfalls and imperfection (Richards and Malven 1997).

An important point to be made here is that the goal of the vocabulary measurement in this study is not the same as the goals of the above-mentioned instruments. That is, in this study the intention is to examine whether a particular set of words, under a certain condition, can be turned into "uncontrolled productive" vocabulary.

### **5.1 Participants**

The participants of the current study were intermediate students ranging in age from twenty-five to thirty-five years. They were males and females

## Does Translation Contribute to Learners' Vocabulary?

studying at the intermediate level in a language institute in Shiraz, Iran. There were four groups as follows:

- female experimental group (N = 22)
- female control group (N = 22)
- male experimental group (N = 22)
- male control group (N = 22)

### 5.2 Instruments

Since the goal of the study was to find out whether, at the end of the treatment, the target words would turn into "uncontrolled productive" vocabulary, a researcher-made test was designed. In this test, the goal was to elicit the names of twenty objects shown to the students under a time limit. All the items were "nouns". This was because nouns and their corresponding pictures were very suitable for the elicitation task, whereas other parts of speech were difficult to depict.

Thus, twenty nouns whose use would be very easy with little structural competence were chosen. That is, the words were chosen in such a way that even very weak pupils were able to use them by making a very simple sentence like, "It is a ... ."

### 5.3 Procedure

All the four groups of participants were taught 20 nouns. The procedure for selecting the 20 words was as follows:

Thirty words were first selected. Then it was necessary to find out whether the learners were familiar with their meanings or not as known words would not serve the purpose of the study. Consequently, the participants were given a list of the selected words. They were asked to look at the list under a time limit and put a tick before the words whose meanings they knew. The justification for allotting a very short time was to prevent pupils from focusing on the words, so that they would not be able to commit some of the items to memory. Thus, 28 words that had not been familiar to the students were extracted.

The words were chosen in such a way that they would have as few synonyms as possible to hinder test bias. Accordingly, the next step was to confirm the consistency of the words that most of the instructors and native speakers would use for a particular item. Some instructors and native speakers were provided with vivid photos of the corresponding items and were asked to write the name of each below the pertinent picture. In this way 20 most frequently used words were selected. (See the Appendix)

The next phase was to teach the words to students. Five words were determined to be taught per session, that is, four sessions altogether. In teaching the words, experimental groups were provided with the L1 translations of the items, whereas the control groups received L2 definitions

of the vocabulary items. Moreover, the teaching of the words was done in the first 5 to 10 minutes of each class session when the students were fresh.

After four sessions of instruction, the participants were given the corresponding test. Pictures of the taught words were shown, using an overhead projector, and the participants were asked to write the names of the objects they saw in the corresponding boxes provided in the answer sheet. The time allotted for retrieving each word and writing it down was very short so that the students would not be able to think a lot to recall the pertinent word. The answer sheets were corrected and each correct item was given one point and this provided a maximum score of 20.

#### **5.4 Data analysis**

Before going any further in this section, it should be noted that the four groups of participants mentioned earlier consisted of two categories altogether. The first category included gender and the second was concerned with the study group (experimental or control). Thus, a 2×2×2 ANOVA was run to analyze the data. The results are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1. ANOVA Results on Free Active Vocabulary Scores**

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Corrected Model	312.455(a)	3	104.152	3.403	.021
Intercept	5070.727	1	5070.727	165.683	.000
group	235.636	1	235.636	7.699	<b>.007</b>
gender	76.409	1	76.409	2.497	.118
group*gender	.409	1	.409	.013	.908
Error	2570.818	84	30.605		
Total	7954.000	88			
Corrected Total	2883.273	87			

Dependent Variable: FAV

**Table 2. Group Statistics for FAV Scores**

	group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
FA	control	44	<b>5.9545</b>	5.42155	.81733
	experimental	44	<b>9.2273</b>	5.67272	.85519

According to Table 1 for the independent variable "group" the p value is smaller than .05 ( $p < .05$ ). Thus the difference between "experimental" and "control" groups is significant. However, for the other independent variable, "gender", the p value is greater than .05 ( $p > .05$ ), hence the difference is not significant. There is no significant interaction between the independent variables either ( $p = .908$ ).

## **Does Translation Contribute to Learners' Vocabulary?**

### **6 Discussion**

Below the answers to the previously-stated research questions are given based on research findings.

As Table 1 reveals, with the significance magnitude of .118 which is larger than .05, the gender difference is not significant. That is to say, gender did not influence the results pertinent to "Free Active Vocabulary" test. In other words, providing L1 translation of the words being taught will not make any contribution to pupils' free active vocabulary repertoire in terms of their gender. Hence the null hypothesis corresponding to the independent variable "gender" is retained.

On the other hand, for the independent variable "group" the difference is significant due to the magnitude of .007 which is smaller than .05 ( $p < .05$ ). This confirms the superior performance of one group to the other. Accordingly, Table 2 shows that the mean score of the "experimental" group is higher than that of the "control" group. To put it differently, L1 translation of the words helped pupils to have quicker access to the words that had been taught than L2 definition did. This in turn indicates that the words whose L1 meanings were given to learners could be used freer and more productively than those whose L2 definitions were provided.

It is worth mentioning that the findings of this research are in line with the Widdowson's opinion that by making use of translation, second language can be presented as an extension and alternative realization of what second language learners have acquired during their L2 study. Also, the results of this project substantiated the claim of Storch and Wigglesworth (2003) and Kim & Elder (2008) who believe that translation technique has methodological value in advance classes. That is to say, by judicious use of translation in class, instructors can enhance pupils' internalization of the target language in general and vocabulary in particular. Moreover, since L1 and L2 language stores in mind are linked, as Channell (1988) believes, students will need the L1 equivalents of English words so that they can use them freely in their communications. That is, the words should become part of pupils' free active vocabulary repertoire as the use of translation in this project helped us reach that.

Needless to mention that the findings of this research are in sharp contrast with Cook's weak form of translation use which emphasized the minimal utilization of translation technique. Neither do the findings agree with the suggestions of Cohen and Macaro (2008) and Duff and Polio (1990) on enhancing the proportion of the L2 components for L1 ones.

Thus according to what was mentioned above and the statistics given in related tables, we can conclude that providing L1 equivalents of English words has a significant impact on turning them into "Free Active Vocabularies" which in turn will come to learners' help in improving their proficiency.

### **7 Conclusion**

Contrary to the conventional method of teaching L2 without reference to L1 and avoiding it totally, the teaching approach tried out in this study endorsed introducing L1 equivalents of English "words" to learners.

Also, it can be noted that in EFL contexts students of second language would benefit from translation. That is, in almost every context of second language learning pupils try to match the L1 equivalents of the words being taught to the definition provided by the teacher. That is, when a definition of a particular word is being given by a teacher, students are trying to find the meaning of that word in their L1. Thus, they subconsciously use "translation" strategy. Hence, one can conclude that "translation" is an almost inevitable strategy in most second language learning contexts. The only difference is that, the students use "translation" strategy in their minds, however, teachers utilize that technique explicitly which in turn helps pupils boost their "free active" vocabulary and consequently their proficiency. Finally, it could be said that instead of considering "translation" technique as a hindrance to second language learning and thinking in second language, one should look at "translation" as a technique whose application would be beneficial to both teachers and students in terms of saving time, improving "uncontrolled active" vocabulary, and expanding proficiency.

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## Does Translation Contribute to Learners' Vocabulary?

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## **Does Translation Contribute to Learners' Vocabulary?**

### **Appendix**

#### **Words taught**

- 1-Barrel
- 2-Canteen
- 3-Broom
- 4-Gown
- 5-Chandelier
- 6-Mermaid
- 7-Hammock
- 8-Handcuffs
- 9-Harp
- 10-Lantern
- 11-Mascara
- 12-Pliers
- 13-Pirate
- 14-Podium
- 15-Tongs
- 16-Stethoscope
- 17-Thimble
- 18-Wheelbarrow
- 19-Vice
- 20- Wrench