

Beginners' Attitude towards Doing and Using Translation Exercises in Reading Comprehension Classes

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Abstract

Due to the dominance of the monolingual approaches to foreign language teaching, translation was either marginalized or definitely banned. The role of translation has been criticized for being inappropriate, developing laziness and causing interference which are regarded detrimental to foreign language learning. However, with the technological advancement and the great need for communication, the role of translation started to grow steadily. Nowadays, translation is being perceived differently from the past. Theorists, scholars and pedagogues are currently reconsidering the facilitative role which translation can play in foreign language teaching in general and the EFL in specific. The main purpose of this study was to investigate Moroccan beginner learners' attitudes towards the use of translation exercises in reading comprehension classes. To do this all, the study employed a quantitative method. For this purpose, 63 Moroccan middle school beginner learners of English were asked to answer a five-point Likert scale questionnaire after going through the experience of doing translation activities in reading comprehension classes for a school year. Data analysis and statistical calculations revealed that beginner learners appreciated doing translation exercises. Analysis also showed that the students have a positive attitude towards incorporating translation exercises in the teaching of reading comprehension.

Keywords: foreign language learning, reading comprehension, translation exercises

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1. Introduction

The adoption of the grammar translation method in foreign language teaching has given great importance to learners' L1 for it has been used as a teaching and learning tool for many years (Larson-freeman, 2000). However, the rise of the monolingual and communicative methods to foreign language teaching as a reaction to the GTM led to the marginalization of translation. Later, GTM was banned from being used in foreign language classrooms (Hawks, 2001; PennyCook, 1994; Packet, 2003; Wringe, 1989). The use of translation has been severely criticized for being inappropriate, developing laziness and dependency in learners, minimizing target language exposure and was openly rejected during the 1970's and 1980's (Kavaliauskienė and Kaminskienė, 2007).

Other strong arguments against the use of L1 in the EFL classroom come from Swift (2006). He believes that students will depend on L1 to understand and will not be able to try to figure out meanings from context or English explanations provided by teachers. Similarly, Ross (2000) argues that the rationale against using translation is founded on obliging learners to share their precious L2 use time with the L1 which is not a productive use of the opportunities given in class. As a follower of the monolingual approach, Malmkjaer (1998) lists a number of main reasons why translation fell from favour according to him.

Duff (1994) specifies further reasons of objections to the use of translation in foreign language classes. He stresses that translation is text-bound and targets only two skills, i.e., reading and writing, in addition to the fact that it is not a communicative activity as it does not involve oral interaction. Duff (1994) also claims that translation is a boring activity. That is, it is not supposed to create motivation. Adding to this, it is also a widely held view that translation is not a suitable exercise in the initial stages of teaching (Muranoi, 2000).

However, in the last two decades and even before, voices rose calling for rethinking the position of translation in EFL classes. Theorists drew attention to the role it can play in foreign language teaching (Duff, 1994; Leonardi, 2011). Scholars in the same field criticized the banning of translation use in EFL classes. Instead, they advocated the idea of readopting it in the teaching of foreign language as a legitimate pedagogical tool (Harmer, 1991; Ellis, 1992; Ur, 1996). More criticism against banning translation in EFL classes highlighted the impossibility of depriving learners from thinking in it and linking it with their existing L2 knowledge. Cook (2007) states that "L1 is present in L2 learners' minds whether teachers want it to be there or not. The L2 knowledge is being created in them is connected in all sorts of ways with their L1 knowledge (P.584)". Year

after year then, calls for reintroducing translation in EFL classrooms were becoming louder as a result of research which showed that it can play a very important facilitative role in the teaching of foreign languages (Ellis, 2005; Han, 2005; Eskildsen, 2008; Pool, 2005; Mouhana, 2010).

2. Statement of the problem

After years of banning, a new stance which advocates the facilitative function of translation has been adopted by theorists. Harmer (2001), for instance, argues that switching from L2 to L1 is facilitative and contributes to success in foreign language learning. Similarly, Popovic (2001) sees that translation can promote foreign language learning. Also, L1/translation is regarded as a rich source for learners to make up for their linguistic limitations while learning a foreign language (Corder, 1981).

In Moroccan public schools, English is taught for the first time to third graders, beginner learners between 13 and 16 years old. English classes are merely given in English. Besides, English teachers are, in the light of the curriculum and the ministerial guidelines, supposed to avoid any use of the students' mother tongue or translation in class. Studying English for the first time, beginner learners are expected to face difficulties. Generally, they are supposed to show fear and lack of self-confidence due to facing the new course content. More specifically, the reading comprehension class may constitute a real challenge for beginners provided that they get in contact with L2 reading material for the first time.

In foreign language learning, the reading comprehension skill is considered very basic. That is, along with listening, speaking and writing reading is very significant to the learning of a foreign language. L2 Learners need to be good readers so that they can learn a foreign language (Robinson, 1991). Additionally, reading is the most stable and durable language skill which plays an important role in foreign language learning contexts (Rivers, 1981). However, learners in foreign language classes, particularly beginners, are expected to find difficulties in reading comprehension given that achieving the comprehension of a text in L2 is not an easy task (Ling, 2011).

Similarly, Grabe and Stoller (2002) argue that L2 learners face difficulties in reading comprehension because of a big shortage in their basic linguistic knowledge. In this respect, the use of translation exercises in reading comprehension classes as a teaching technique is believed to be appreciated by students. Also, this type of exercises could lead to encouraging students to perform better in reading comprehension classes as a whole. The purpose of the present study is to discover students' reactions to doing translation exercises along with eliciting their attitude towards using translation exercises in the teaching of reading comprehension.

3. Research questions

Valuing learners' viewpoints on the teaching and learning processes of foreign language, the present study intended to investigate the function and effectiveness of translation exercises in reading comprehension classes from beginner learners' perspective. To attain the abovementioned purpose, this study attempted to find answers to the following two research questions:

- 1) What are beginner learners' reactions about doing translation exercises?
- 2) What is beginners' attitude towards using translation exercises in reading comprehension classes?

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

In the beginning of the 2020-2021 school year, schools were re-opened in Morocco after an unexpected lockdown period imposed by the Covid19 pandemic. Because the study targeted beginners of English, two classes of third grade learners were randomly chosen. A total of 63 students were selected to participate in this study. Getting students to know about translation activities, they were tasked to do translation exercises along with other common tasks in reading comprehension lessons in 13 classes. This measure was intended to pave the way to the quantitative aspect of the study. That is, allowing students discover translation exercises.

4.2 Instruments

To collect data for this study, the questionnaire, as a basic instrument, was adopted.

4.3 The questionnaire

To gather data for the research questions mentioned above, a two-section questionnaire was designed based on Liao (2006) sample with a five-point Likert scale design from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree". On the one hand, the first section of the questionnaire contained seven items which basically targeted knowing students' reactions about doing the translation exercises in reading comprehension classes. On the other hand, the second section contained seven items which mainly focused on discovering students' attitude towards the use of translation exercises in reading comprehension classes. The questionnaire was translated into the students' L1 to facilitate the task of completion in addition to avoiding any confusion of the content. The questionnaire was handed to students for completion after experiencing translation exercises in reading comprehension classes.

Prior to the completion of the questionnaire, the selected students for the study had reading comprehension classes wherein translation exercises were deliberately included in the three phases of the reading class, namely pre, while and post reading. Basically, the exercises were short, varied and adapted to the level of the students.

The data collected through the questionnaire was analysed through the use of the SPSS software. Primarily, the analysis focused on frequencies and percentages then deeper elements of analysis, namely Chronbach alpha, PCA and regression, were used.

5. Results

5.1 Students' reactions towards doing translation exercises

Addressing the first research question, the 63 students were requested to respond to seven items which mainly targeted discovering their reactions towards doing translation exercises. The percentages of students' choices were measured. The table below displays students' level of disagreement and indifference towards the seven items.

Table 1. Students' strong disagreement, disagreement and indifference choices.

Items	Item1	Item 2	Item 3	Item 4	Item 5	Item 6	Item 7
Str. disagreement	1	0	0	1	15	0	6
Disagreement	1	0	2	1	22	6	4
indifference	1	0	1	6	6	3	2

A close look at table 12 above is enough to conclude that the students' level of disagreement regarding doing translation exercises is very low. Referring to the low scores of disagreement (table 12) along with the high percentages of agreement inferred from the table, results indicate that students have a positive reaction towards the experience of doing translation exercises in reading comprehension classes. Differently put, it is understood from the data shown above that translation exercises are a preferred or welcomed type of tasks to be assigned in beginners' reading comprehension classes.

5.2 Students' perception of including translation exercises in reading comprehension classes.

Methodologically, getting learners' feedback on doing translation exercises in reading comprehension classes is very central to seeking their overall perception on a possible inclusion of translation in future reading comprehension classes. For the sake of giving them the chance to build their opinions on a reasonable basis, learners were asked to express their opinions through a questionnaire following trying translation exercises in 13 classes of reading comprehension along the 2020-2021 school year. The following table summarizes the total percentages of students' agreement towards incorporating translation exercises in reading comprehension classes. Table 2: Percentages of students' total agreement towards incorporating translation exercises in reading comprehension classes.

Items	Item8	Item 9	Item 10	Item 11	Item 12	Item 13	Item 14
Total agreement	96,8%	93,7%	95%	95,2%	93,7%	88,9	81%

The results displayed in the table above, show that beginner learners have almost totally agreed on the idea of including translation exercises in the reading comprehension class. This is clearly deduced from the high percentages of total agreement presented in the table. It is noted that the percentages exceed 80% and noticeably reach 96, 8% which suggest that students have a positive attitude towards incorporating translation exercises in reading comprehension classes of beginners.

In this study, discovering beginner learners' attitude as an explanatory variable about the use of translation exercises in reading comprehension classes is strongly related to their reactions about doing translation exercises. For this purpose, linear regression analysis was applied on the statistical results of the two variables. The following table summarizes the regression results obtained along with the tests performed on the results.

Table 3: Results of regression analysis

Source	Coefficient	Std-Err	t-test	P-value	N	
React	1.96564	0.3689	-5.33	0.000	63	R-square
Opin	1.84683	0.6613	2.79	0.007		0.719
CONST	65.8189	3.5107	18.75	0.000		Prb> F
						0.000
						F(2, 59)
						25.781

As shown in the table above, the two variables were students' "reactions" and "opinions". The coefficient of variable 1 = 1, 96 while the one of the second variable = 1, 84. The two coefficients show that the students' level while doing translation exercises, based on students' reactions and opinions, progresses at 1, 96 and 1, 84. That is, translation exercises in reading comprehension classes cause some progress to happen when incorporated as teaching a technique.

To test the validity of linear regression results, we performed Standard-error and T-test. According to the principle of Standard-error test, when the value of this test is closer to 00 the results reflect more reality. Results of Std-err of both variables show that the value of Std-err is very close to 00. That is, it = 0, 36 for variable 1 and

0, 66 for variable 2. Based on the two values, it is concluded that translation exercises in reading comprehension classes have a real positive influence students' performance.

T-test was performed for the sake of testing the validity of students' answers. Normally, when $t \geq 2$ the coefficients are valid. The results presented in table 5 show that $t = -5, 33$ for variable 1 and 2, 79 regarding variable 2. It is understood that the two coefficients, based on students' responses, are credible. This, in turn, goes in line with the p-value test which shows that the coefficients are valid and have credibility given the fact that the p-value for the two variables equals 0, 00 and 0, 007.

The R-square test was implemented to see the extent to which translation exercises contribute positively to the teaching of reading comprehension to beginners. It is commonly and statistically known that when the value of R-square exceeds 0, 50% it is very good. As shown in the table, the R-square value = 0, 71% which is clearly high.

To test the general level of this part of the study, two more tests were performed: Probability-fisher and Fisher. For the study to be generally good and reliable, the value of Prob-fisher must be $\leq 0, 05$ and that of Fisher ≥ 4 . As easily noticed in the table 5, rob-fisher = 0, 00 while $F = 25, 78$. These values show that the results of this study are reliable.

In the light of the previously displayed results, we found that. There is a strong relation between the two explanatory variables, "*reactions*" and "*opinions*", and the explanatory variable, "*the use of translation exercises in reading comprehension classes*". This is justified by the value of the Fisher-calculated statistic = 25,781, compared to the tabular value of Fisher with degrees of freedom $F(2, 59)$ as well as the value of R-square = 0.719, which states that the level of contribution of exogenous variables contribute at 71.9% to the determination of students' learning speed.

With regards to the regression analysis results shown in table 5 above, the coefficients of the two variables (reactions and opinion) indicate students' belief about translation exercises which suggests that their performance, while doing translation exercises, progresses at 1, 96 and 1, 84 in relation to the coefficients of the two variables. In this sense, it is concluded that students believe that translation exercises bring about some progress in their performance when incorporated as a teaching technique in reading comprehension classes.

6. Discussion

The results of this study allowed us to conclude that beginner learners reacted much positively towards doing translation exercises in the reading comprehension class. Students' positive feedback finds support in the literature in which students' reaction is regarded natural. In this regard, Buckmaster (2000) argues that "language learners are natural translators because they map L2 directly on the mother tongue to short cut the process of learning (P.1)".

Accordingly, students' strong reaction about translation can be explained as being natural, innate and very important to the learning process. Additionally, beginners' positive feedback after doing translation exercises finds much confirmation in Duff's words when he claims that "translation is a natural and necessary activity. More so, indeed, than many of the fashionable activities invented for language learners (Duff 1989, PP. 6-7)".

Suggesting the idea that students incline to using L1 as a problem solving option when doing language learning tasks is consistent with Koppe and Kremer (2007) who stress that "they [students] resort to their translation skills from the very beginning of any process whether their teachers like it or not (P.3)".

What further backs up students' appreciative stance of doing translation tasks in reading comprehension classes is the impracticality of considering the marginalization of L1. In this sense, Clanfield and Foord (2000) express their total rejection of any attempt to disregard learners' L1. They argue that "any attempt to eliminate the use of the mother tongue completely from the classroom is likely to be futile (Clanfield and Foord 2000, P. 1)".

Not less importantly, Upton and Thompson (2001), in the light of the findings of a study carried by them on L1 use in the reading process of Chinese and Japanese ESL learners, support students' positive stance towards translation in reading comprehension. They found that reading was not a monolingual process but an activity in which learners tend to resort to translation for comprehension (Upton and Thompson, 2001).

More specifically, the same investigation showed that beginner learners have a great preference of using L1 in all aspects of reading comprehension according to Upton and Thompson (2001). Hand in hand with Upton and Thompson's finding, Fernandez (2012) carried out a research on the topic. The researcher discovered that students were unexpectedly positive about translation exercises. Translation, according to her findings, was one of the students' favourite strategies (Fernandez, 2012).

Methodologically, getting learners' feedback on doing translation exercises in reading comprehension classes is very central to seeking their overall perception on a possible inclusion of translation in future reading comprehension classes. The results reveal that beginner learners have almost totally agreed on the idea of including translation exercises in the reading comprehension classes believing that translation exercises cause them some progress when incorporated as a teaching technique.

Students' belief, in this respect, goes in line with Buckmaster (2000), Najduchowski (2008) and Swift (2006) who all argue that permitting the use of translation is expected to make students, especially beginners, learn better by containing their fear and providing a less tense atmosphere of learning. What explains and supports students' perception of translation exercises as a technique which can bring about improvements to their learning more are Koppe and Kremer's claims. In this regard, they stress that "Translation can also play a role in the development of communicative abilities since speakers are often engaged in the work of sharing and negotiating meaning depending on the interpretative community and context (Koppe and Kremer 2007, p. 2)".

Based on this perspective, it is understood that the use of translation exercises can be one of the criteria which lead to improving students' performance in the EFL classroom. A further idea which advocates the fact that translation exercises are assumed to improve reading comprehension as a receptive skill for beginners, in specific, is Swift's view. In this respect, he emphasizes that the use of translation / L1 can be a good technique to check learners' receptive competence (Swift, 2006).

More support of perceiving translation exercises as activities which promote learners' level comes from Fernandez (2012) who concluded, from the results of a study which she carried out, that students considered translation exercises motivating and a tool which facilitates deeper understanding of the content. In the same line, Fernandez Guerra (2014) surveyed Spanish students to get their responses and views about translation exercises in the EFL classes. The results of the study showed that students had a positive view. They preferred translation because it makes it easy for them to learn L2 and allows them understand the differences between L1 and L2 (Fernandez Guerra, 2014).

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the present study focused on students as active players in the learning process. Discovering their reactions and eliciting their perception about the researched topic was very important to investigate a possible reintroduction of L1/ translation in the EFL class with specific interest in reading comprehension classes of beginners. It was revealed from the results that beginner learners of English in the Moroccan middle school have a preference in doing translation exercises along with agreeing to a far extent with the idea of incorporating translation exercises in reading comprehension classes. These findings, as discussed above, are in line with many previous studies in the field which advocate including translation activities EFL classrooms. Besides, students' positive attitudes call upon to the necessity of investigating teachers' attitudes about the same topic of research. Also, it is high time for future research in the field to shed light on more practical methodological ideas to attractively reinvest learners' L1 in the teaching of the basic language skills out of the umbrella of the grammar translation method.

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Appendix:

Questionnaire

This questionnaire aims at investigating students' reactions and their viewpoints towards the use of translation exercises in the teaching of reading comprehension to beginner learners in the EFL classroom. You are kindly requested to fill in the questionnaire. Your contribution is essential to the completion of this study.

RESPONDENT'S PROFILE

1. SCHOOL:
2. AGE: 13 14 15 16 17
3. SEX: Male Female

Please indicate how far you agree with the following aspects related to the use of translation exercises in the teaching of reading comprehension to beginners.

Note: Numbers from 1 to 5 are used to show your extent of agreement as follows:

- 1= Total disagreement
- 2= Disagreement
- 3= Indifferent
- 4= Agreement
- 5= Total agreement

SECTION ONE: The experience of doing translation activities

Aspects	Total disagreement	disagreement	Indifferent	Agreement	Full agreement
1.I liked to do translation exercises in reading comprehension class.	1	2	3	4	5
2.The translation exercises were useful and interesting.	1	2	3	4	5
3.The exercises helped with me to do other reading comprehension activities.	1	2	3	4	5
4.I performed well while doing translation exercises.	1	2	3	4	5
4.I needed help from classmates while doing the translation exercises.	1	2	3	4	5
5.My participation was good in the reading comprehension class.	1	2	3	4	5
6.I had enough confidence in the reading comprehension class;	1	2	3	4	5

SECTION TWO: Inclusion of translation exercises in reading comprehension classes

Aspects	Total disagreement	disagreement	Indifferent	Agreement	Full agreement
1. I will like doing translation exercises in the coming reading comprehension classes	1	2	3	4	5
2.Translation exercises in reading comprehension classes are beneficial to students.	1	2	3	4	5
3.Incorporating translation exercises in reading comprehension classes is a very good strategy.	1	2	3	4	5
4.Translation exercises help students understand the reading material well.	1	2	3	4	5
5.Translation exercises can facilitate doing other reading comprehension tasks.	1	2	3	4	5
6.My participation in reading comprehension classes becomes better thanks to doing translation exercises.	1	2	3	4	5
7.Translation exercises increase students' self-confidence in reading comprehension classes.	1	2	3	4	5