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SHOULD WE USE TRANSLATION WHEN TEACHING VOCABULARY TO OUR STUDENTS?

Abstract

In recent years, pedagogical translation seems to have regained its reputation in Foreign Language Teaching (FLT). A growing body of research appears to point to the fact that, when used in moderation, in combination with other teaching methods, pedagogical translation can be a useful tool in adopting new knowledge and strengthening students' competencies in a foreign language. Specifically, this paper focuses on the potential merits of using translation into students' mother tongue when acquiring new vocabulary. A small-scale experiment was designed to investigate whether students of English would learn vocabulary better if the words and phrases that were being taught were translated into their mother tongue or if the definitions in English were provided. The participants were first year students of English as a subsidiary course at the Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade. Ten words/phrases describing people's personalities were chosen. The experimental group was given the translation of these words/phrases, whereas the control group was provided with their English definitions. The vocabulary items were reviewed in three subsequent classes with both groups, using similar exercises. Both groups were then tested on their knowledge of this vocabulary. Finally, the results of the two groups were compared and analyzed.

Key words: pedagogical translation, definitions, vocabulary, personality words and phrases

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1. Introduction

It has almost become a common place to begin any discussion about translation by acknowledging the stigma surrounding translation in the context of foreign language teaching. According to some authors, translation used to be an 'object of ridicule' and, at some point, even banished from classrooms as an option in ESL (Popović 2018). Fortunately, it has displayed an enormous amount of 'resilience', probably due to the fact that the realities of communicative situations in today's world often require speakers to be able to communicate 'both into and from the language system' (Popović 2018). It is our belief that these realities have prompted scholars to adopt a broader, more holistic view to language learning and acquisition, one that recognizes translation as one of many pedagogical tools that both teachers and students could use to support the process of understanding and learning the language.

In their study of learning strategies in second language acquisition, O`Malley and Chamot (1990) classify translation as one of the cognitive skills used by language learners along with rehearsal, contextualization, substitution and note taking (1990: 126). Specifically, the authors conclude that "students at the beginning levels of language study relied most on repetition, translation and transfer, whereas, more advanced students relied most on inferencing, though without abandoning familiar strategies such as repetition and translation" (O`Malley and Chamot 1990: 127). In other words, whether it is encouraged or not by teachers, mental translation as a cognitive strategy definitely emerges as a reality when it comes to processing the meaning of new words.

The role of an active learner seems to be the focal point in the current pedagogical trends (Scrivener 2011: 393) emphasizing the importance of the learner-centered strategies that utilize pair work, group work and other forms of peer instruction or cooperation in the classroom (Harmer 1998: 21). The question that arises here is: is it possible to completely discourage or even eliminate the use of L1 (through translation or code-switching) in such circumstances or would it make sense to acknowledge these practices and even use them in moderation to support the learning process?

In this paper, therefore, we aim to provide a quantitative study of the potential merits of using translation into students' mother tongue when acquiring new vocabulary. A small-scale experiment was designed to investigate the benefits of using L1 equivalents in the process of understanding and acquiring new vocabulary in L2. The presentation of new vocabulary, its consolidation through practice and repetition, as well as the process of testing the short and long-term recall of the vocabulary in question are described in some of the following sections of this paper. The results of the experiment are also presented and analyzed in the final section.

2. Translation as a skill vs. pedagogical translation

It may seem obvious that the way we use the term translation is in reference to translation as a pedagogical tool, a type of classroom exercise designed to aid students' understanding of the vocabulary being taught and not as a skill in its own right. Nevertheless, it felt necessary to once again emphasize this distinction for two reasons. The first reason is the obvious wish to avoid any kind of misunderstanding as to the type of translation used in the experiment and the purpose of such practice. The second one has to do with our wish to acknowledge the enormous contribution of translation theorists who have managed to draw a clear line between translation as a professional skill focused on the development of 'transfer competence' and pedagogical translation used in foreign language teaching in order to enhance students' performance skills (L1-L2 translation), test their reading comprehension or develop some technical skills, such as the use of dictionaries, etc. (Nord 2005: 155). Translation is viewed here as just one in the range of tools that teachers may use to support the learning process. In the most general sense, Nord concludes that, as a classroom exercise, "translation is supposed to provide metalinguistic insights into the structural differences and similarities of two languages" (Nord 2005: 155).

Considering the literature reviewed in this introduction, we believe that it would be safe to conclude that there are obvious merits to using translation in the context of foreign language teaching at any level of instruction: with beginners, as a form of mental processing of the meaning of new vocabulary or even larger units (such as sentences or texts) and with advanced students, as a form of a metalinguistic analysis of structural properties of both L1 and L2.

On the other hand, there are those who have opposing opinions. "Although time-saving, translation should be used as little as possible, but not avoided at all costs. There are numerous efficient techniques that can be successfully used to get meaning across […]" (Pilipović 2010: 76). Pilipović (2010: 75) mentions translation as a way of teaching vocabulary in cases where two words, like *borrow* and *lend* have the same translation equivalent in the students' mother tongue, but even in this case the students end up confusing the words, since they remember that the words have the same meaning in their mother tongue, but not how to use them in English. However, one might easily resolve this issue by using *take* and *give* instead of translating the words *borrow* and *lend*.

In his dictionary of terms and concepts, Thornbury (2006: 240–241) mentions several strategies connected to teaching and revising vocabulary: visual aids, demonstration, situations, using texts and using dictionaries. Translating a word or phrase into the students' mother tongue is only suggested as a way of vocabulary revision.

3. Translation in vocabulary teaching

When it comes to vocabulary teaching and the theoretical principles underlying our approach in the experiment mentioned earlier, especially in terms of the strategies employed in presenting the vocabulary in question, we have relied on the principles of direct vocabulary learning as described by Nation (2001).

In his approach, Nation proposes the use of word cards when introducing new words in L2 supplemented either by the translation equivalents in L1 or their definitions in L2. This direct method in vocabulary learning, which is also described as language-focused learning, enables learners to grasp the 'underlying concept' behind the meaning of the word at the initial stage of introducing new vocabulary (Nation 2001: 302). Since vocabulary learning is a cumulative process, Nation maintains that the awareness of the different, contextual realizations of the meaning may be achieved by adding collocations or even sentences that would illustrate its various uses or its grammatical features in different contexts. It is constantly reiterated that this is a complementary method that does not exclude some indirect approaches to vocabulary teaching and learning as well.

Nation states that "one of the most effective ways of encountering new words is through deliberate study", which equates direct vocabulary learning with 'deliberate learning', whereas indirect vocabulary learning in context equals 'incidental learning' (Nation 2001: 302). This conclusion proves significant when it comes to the number of repetitions in the process of vocabulary learning. Two relevant studies are mentioned. According to one, only six repetitions of as much as 216 word pairs were needed for students to master 80% of the words and the rate of learning only increased as the process progressed (see Crothers and Suppes 1967). This proves that the effectiveness of learning through direct study increases since the learners are aware of the purpose of the task at hand. In the study of the effectiveness of indirect vocabulary learning in context (see Saragi, Nation and Meister 1978), it turned out that around sixteen repetitions were needed for students to recognize the meaning of a word since this approach excludes deliberate, conscious study of the word meaning.

Another study that we have looked into investigates the effects of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries on the recognition and recall of concrete and abstract L2 vocabulary (Ali Zarei and Lofti 2013). According to the authors, the prevalent opinion is that monolingual dictionaries are generally more beneficial when it comes to learning new vocabulary due to the fact that dictionary definitions require more effort when processing the meaning of a word, which consequently results in 'improved retention' of the new vocabulary (Ali Zarei and Lofti 2013: 49). Bilingual dictionaries also have their merits since they provide direct equivalents in L1 and could be more beneficial for students of lower proficiency level. However, the results of the study have

demonstrated no significant differences, either in terms of the type of word in question (concrete or abstract) or in terms of the dictionaries used (monolingual or bilingual). To be precise, the quantitative analysis seems to have shown that slight differences can be observed since the students using bilingual dictionaries proved to be more successful in vocabulary production of concrete words, whereas students using monolingual dictionaries scored higher when it comes to abstract words. The differences, however, were statistically insignificant for a definitive conclusion to be drawn in favour of either monolingual or bilingual dictionaries or regarding the interplay between the type of word and the type of dictionary used (Ali Zarei and Lofti 2013: 46-47). The dictionary used with the participants of this study was an elementary one (Ali Zarei and Lofti 2013: 50), so the assumption is that the participants were at lower levels of language knowledge. For the purpose of this paper, we have focused our attention on a set of personality adjectives, i.e. words with abstract or semi-idiomatic meaning, which is described in detail in the following sections.

Finally, although this is outside the scope of this paper, it might be worth mentioning that translation has its merits in vocabulary testing as well. Namely, when it comes to beginners, it may be argued that providing an equivalent in their mother tongue or providing a synonym in L2 would require the same amount of effort on behalf of the learner at this level, whereas any insistence on providing a definition or an explanation of the word in L2 implies the usage of more sophisticated structures of L2 such as relative clauses or reduced relative clauses, etc. (Nation 2001: 351). A poor performance of students in such cases might be attributed to their inability to express themselves accurately in L2 rather than to the lack of knowledge of the word meaning.

4. The experiment

In order to explore the extent to which translating words and phrases from English into students' mother tongue facilitates their comprehension and retention of those vocabulary items, we have decided to conduct a small-scale experiment.

Ten words/phrases were chosen, all of them used for describing people's personality traits, and all of them idiomatic (the list is below).

1. cold fish
2. jack of all trades
3. dark horse
4. pig-headed
5. chatterbox
6. armchair critic
7. happy camper
8. cheapskate

9. good egg
10. wallflower

The experiment lasted for one month during the summer semester of the 2018/19 school year. It included work with two groups of students (the experimental and the control group). The participants in our research were all 1ˢᵗ year students at the Faculty of Philology, Belgrade University. They chose English to be their subsidiary language. They all share their mother tongue, which is Serbian. Although this course is attended by around 100 students each year, the number of students taking part in the experiment was comparatively low. There were 15 students in the experimental group and 16 of them in the control group. This was due to the fact that the participants taken into consideration for the experiment were only those students who attended each class when the vocabulary was presented, reviewed and tested. Since the students are allowed to miss several classes during the semester, the number of participants was considerably lower than expected.

The experiment was conducted in the following way. First, the abovementioned vocabulary was introduced to both groups. This was done by giving the experimental group ten words/phrases, providing the students with a translation for each of them, and using each item in context by giving the students a sentence in English. The same procedure was followed with the control group, the only difference being that the control group was given the definition of the words/phrases in English. Below are several examples of these procedures.

• **Dark horse**, *favorit iz senke,* unexpectedly wins a competition

Example: *The Democrat from Utah has gone from being a dark horse to the front-runner in the campaign for President.*

• **Chatterbox**, *brbljivac, pričalica*, extremely talkative person

Example: *The girl next to me on the plane was a chatterbox. She never once stopped talking during the flight.*

Several dictionaries, corpora and online references were used for the translation and definitions of the abovementioned words and phrases, as well as for the examples which were used to introduce and later on practice the vocabulary with the students. The list is underneath.

- Jonathan, C. (ed.). (1995)
- Tomović, N. (ed.). (2010)
- Hlebec, B. et al. (2012)
- Davies, M. (2004-), Davies, M. (2008-)
- https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary
- https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english
- https://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary

- http://sentencedict.com/
- https://idioms.thefreedictionary.com/

The introductory phase was followed by three instances of revision. Both groups got very similar exercises to revise all ten phrases. The exercises were designed in such a way that they included the translation of the words/phrases for the experimental group, and the English definitions for the control group. An example of one such exercise used with the two groups can be seen in the Appendix.

Finally, both groups were given an immediate and a postponed multiple choice test. The immediate test took place during the class which came after the final review session (some 5 days after the review class). The postponed test took place around one month (28 days) after the immediate test. What follows is the discussion of the obtained results.

5. Analysis of experiment results

Both the experimental and control groups had almost identical overall scores in the immediate test – the experimental group scored 89.31% and the control group scored 90.62% of correct answers. In the postponed test, both groups performed similarly, with the experimental group obtaining 81.43% and the control group doing slightly better with a score of 84.70%. Results per vocabulary item in both tests also show no systematic advantage of one group over the other – if some items were done better by one group in the first test, this was not necessarily repeated in the second test. Figure 1 shows the results per vocabulary item in the immediate test for both groups.
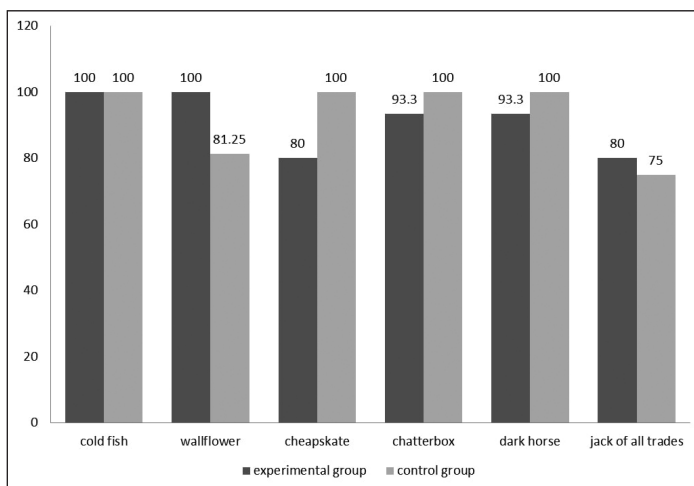

Figure 1. Results per vocabulary item, immediate test

There are several reasons that can account for these results:

1. Both the experimental and control groups are rather small, with only around 15 participants. In groups of this size, individual differences, such as proficiency levels or motivation, become more prominent and can seriously affect experiment results. Consequently, there are no statistically relevant differences in the results of the two groups of participants.

2. According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990: 127), who investigated language learning strategies among students of English, Russian and Spanish in the second and foreign language settings, translation seems to be a favourite learning strategy of learners at all levels of L2 proficiency constituting more than 30% of strategy use. With lower L2 level students, it is one of the three strategies they employ in the process of understanding or using a foreign language. Since our participants in the experiment attend English classes at A2 level (according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), they may have resorted to translation unconsciously in order to make sense of the vocabulary in question despite not being encouraged by the teacher to do so.

3. The items were well-reviewed. After the introductory lesson, the participants were exposed to three spaced repetitions, with the items occurring in a different context each time. This in itself may have been sufficient for retention of the items in both groups. In his chapter on direct vocabulary learning, Nation (2001: 298) maintains that the number of repetitions necessary for retention dramatically decreases when learners deliberately and consciously study the word meaning. He also cites a study (Nation 2001: 81) conducted by McKeown, Beck, Omanson and Pople (1985: 533) which states that if the goal of learning is the use of a newly learned word, then the previous language learning has to "allow the learners to meet the new word being used in several different ways so that the meaning of the word was enriched, not just repeated, by each meaning."

4. Receptive knowledge of the vocabulary was tested. Since receptive learning is easier than productive learning and receptive tests are much easier than productive tests, the high test scores of both groups are not surprising.

6. Conclusion

The experiment conducted between two groups of around 15 university students at A2 level of English proficiency aimed at investigating potential benefits of translation on vocabulary learning and retention did not prove that such benefits existed. This may be due to the fact that language learners generally resort to translation, whether it be introduced by the teacher or not. Sufficient, context rich practice and spaced repetition of targeted vocabulary facilitate learning regardless of vocabulary being taught

by means of translation into L1 or L2 definitions. Testing receptive knowledge of vocabulary may not have been sufficiently discerning since it is far easier to recognise than to recall the right word. And, finally, larger groups of participants would have led to more reliable experiment results.

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Appendix

The revision exercise – experimental group

Use the translations from the box to remind yourself of the words/phrases to describe people, and then fill in the gaps with those words/phrases.

1. cicija, stipsa
2. favorit iz senke
3. majstor za sve
4. pričalica, brbljivac
5. onaj kome je sve potaman
6. dobar čovek
7. tvrdoglava osoba
8. onaj koji kritikuje nešto u šta se ne razume
9. stidljiva osoba koja se drži po strani
10. hladna, odbojna osoba

1. We really need a new heater, but the landlord's such a _____ we'll never get it.
2. Nobody thought Cheri could win the race after breaking her leg last year, but she turned out to be _____ and took first place.
3. Our gardener is _____; he can do carpentering, decorating, a bit of plumbing, and so on.

The revision exercise – control group

Use the definitions from the box to remind yourself of the words/phrases to describe people, and then fill in the gaps with those words/phrases.

1.	a person who does not like spending money
2.	someone who unexpectedly wins a competition
3.	someone who knows how to do many things
4.	someone who talks a lot
5.	a happy, satisfied person
6.	a nice person you can trust
7.	a stubborn person
8.	someone who criticizes something they don't know a lot about
9.	a shy person, not being asked to dance
10.	a cold, distant person

1. We really need a new heater, but the landlord's such
   a _____ we'll never get it.
2. Nobody thought Cheri could win the race after breaking her leg last
   year, but she turned out to be _____and took first place.
3. Our gardener is _____; he can do carpentering,
   decorating, a bit of plumbing, and so on.