

# **The Role of Translation in the Improvement of EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension at the Intermediate Level of Language Proficiency**

**Giti Mousapour Negari**  
**University of Sistan & Baluchestan**

*This study attempts to investigate the role of translation in improving EFL learners' reading comprehension. To that end, 120 learners studying English at different Language Institutes were selected. The Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency (Corrigan, 1979) was administered to determine their level of proficiency. The participants were randomly assigned to two control and two experimental groups. The results demonstrated that translation technique affects the learners' reading comprehension at the intermediate level of language proficiency. The findings of the study will be applicable in teaching language skills, translation studies and lesson planning.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Reading is the most important skill of all skills for language learners in general and for EFL learners in particular and it is one of the most useful and necessary skills for people (Farhady, 2005). On the other hand, one of the major problems of the EFL learners in learning a foreign language is their low comprehension in reading texts. It seems that teaching variables may play an important role in learners' reading comprehension.

The study tries to look at the results of two teaching experiences. In one group, reading passages will be translated for the students by the teacher and in the other group reading passages will not be translated. The ultimate goal of this study is to find out whether translation has any positive effect on EFL learners' reading comprehension.

The purpose of reading "is to read for meaning or to recreate the writer's meaning. Reading to improve pronunciation, practice grammatical forms, and study vocabulary does not constitute reading at all because by definition, reading involves comprehension. When readers are not comprehending, they are not reading" (Chastain, 1988, p. 217).

Reading comprehension is "from a technical perspective, a dynamic mental activity which interacts with the text to extract meaning" (Farhady, 2005, p. 1). It has been pointed out that a model of reading provides an imagined representation of the reading process. Models of the reading process can be represented across a continuum of two opposing approaches in understanding the reading process, namely, bottom-up approaches and top-down approaches (Barnett, 1988).

However, "most current researchers adhere to what has been termed as interactive approaches" (Hudson, 1998, p. 46). These approaches are based on the reading activity that necessarily involves two elements: the text and the reader. In a way, reading strategies reveal the readers' resources for comprehension and indicate how readers conceive a task, what textual cues they attend to, how they make sense of what they read, and what they do when they do not understand (Block, 1986).

Translation, by dictionary definition, consists of changing from one state or form to another, to turn into one's own or another's language (The Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 1986, p. 725). "Translation is basically a change of form. When we speak of the form of a language, we are referring to the actual words, phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, etc., which are spoken or written. These forms are referred to as the surface structure of a language. It is the structural part of the language which is actually seen in print or heard in speech. In translation the form of the source language is replaced by the form of the receptor (target) language" (Larson, 1998, p. 3).

"The term translation itself has several meanings: it can refer to the general subject field, the product (the text has been translated) or the process (the act of producing the translation, otherwise known as translating). The process of translation between two different written languages involves the translator changing an original written text (the source text or ST) in the original verbal language (the source language or SL) into a written text (the target text TT) in a different verbal language (the target language or TL)" (Munday, 2001, p. 4).

The term "communicative translation" is an attempt "to produce on his readers an effect as close as possible to that obtained by the readers of the original. Semantic translation attempts to render as close as the semantic and syntactic structures of the second language allow, the exact contextual meaning of the original" (Newmark, 1981, p. 30).

It is argued that all second language learners access their L1 while processing the L2. "The L2 user does not effectively switch off the L1 while processing the L2, but has it constantly available" (Cook, 1992, p.571). When working with second language learners, teachers must not treat the L2 in isolation from the L1. In fact, one cannot do so, "the L1 is presented in the L2 learners' minds, whether the teacher wants it to be there or not. The L2 knowledge that is being created in them is connected in all sorts of ways with their L1 knowledge" (Cook, 1992, p. 584).

Despite the observations that L2 learners make of their native language, at least in the early stages of language acquisition, "there has been little research on the extent to which non-natives' thoughts are in the TL (target language) and the effectiveness of thinking in the TL as opposed to thinking in the L1" (Cohen, 1992, p. 100). In other words, "at present it remains unclear precisely what role the native language plays in L2 reading comprehension" (Kern, 1994, p. 441). A survey was given to bilingual and multilingual university students to discover factors influencing language of thought. It was explored that not only do people with access to two or more language shift frequently between them, these shifts can be either unintentional (e.g., it is easier to think in one language than another and so the brain automatically shifts language) or intentional (e.g., using another language to help understand the grammar or vocabulary of the target language) (Cohen, 1995).

"Meaning is a communicative and therefore a social phenomenon. Nothing bears meaning and makes sense unless it occurs in communication, which by nature is a social activity. Yet, meaning is encoded in and by language. The construction of meaning is therefore both social and linguistic at the same time. This is to say that meaning, although signaled by language, does not totally reside in it, but is created in part between people in every instance of language use" (Farahzad, 2004, p. 79). She further added that L2 language texts have a static part of meaning, but differ in their interpretations of the source text and have more interpretations in the target language.

Learners can develop their reading comprehension ability by translating target language text into their native language. It is quite clear that text is trying to make sense of its features like sentence structures, context and register. In other words, there should be a kind of textual analysis, which is very important in reading comprehension. In fact the difference between translation and reading is the degree of attention paid by the reader or translator, that is; in translation attention weighs far more heavily than in mere reading (Chellappan, 1982).

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Participants**

The participants were selected from EFL learners studying at English Language Institute in Zahedan, Iran. 120 learners were selected out of 200 by taking Michigan Test of English Language proficiency (Corrigan, 1979). They divided according to their scores. The obtained scores were converted to Z-Scores to indicate how many standard deviations an observation is above or below the mean. The participants then assigned to three groups; beginner (low), intermediate (mid), and advanced (high) learners according to their level of proficiency (two or three standard deviations below the mean was known as beginner; one standard deviation below or above the mean was known as intermediate; and two or three standard deviations above the mean was known as advanced).

Beginners and intermediate learners were randomly assigned into four groups, two experimental and two control groups, each including 30 students. One experimental and one control group consisted of beginners and the other two groups consisted of intermediate learners. Their ages ranged from 18 to 25 and they included both males and females.

### **Instruments**

To fulfill the aim of this study, two testing implements were applied. The “Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency” was administered to distinguish the students’ level of proficiency. The test included 100 items, including three parts: part one was a grammar test; part two was a vocabulary test; and part three was a test of reading comprehension. The participants had 75 minutes to finish the entire test. The second test was an achievement test which was taken at the end of the teaching period. The other materials for the study consisted of reading comprehension passages extracted from the book “Active Skills for Reading” by Anderson (2008).

The final achievement tests were some unfamiliar texts which the students did not practice them in the classroom. The learners had to answer totally 40 comprehension questions following the texts.

### **Procedure**

The participants who were selected by Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency were randomly assigned to four groups, two experimental and two control groups. In the experimental groups the teacher translated reading passages while in the control groups the teacher did not translate the passages. The teacher was the researcher herself for all groups. She has taught English at different high schools and institutes for 8 years. The classes were conducted for 18 sessions, three times a week. Each session took one and half hour. The length of the teaching period lasted 45 days.

In the experimental groups, for both beginner and intermediate learners, the teacher asked the students one by one to read the sentences of the passage and translate them. If they had any questions, they were asked in L1 which was Persian and the teacher answered in L1, too. This process went on until the passage came to the end. Since the students had no more questions, the teacher asked them to answer the comprehension questions which appeared at the end of the passage. The questions were in English and the students wrote the answers in English as well.

The teacher, speaking Persian language, asked the students to stop to check their replies. Each student read a question and then read his / her response. If he/she was correct, the teacher called another student to read the next question. If he/she was incorrect, the teacher selected a different student to supply the correct answer or the teacher herself gave the right answer.

The control groups, both beginner and intermediate groups, were taught without using translation technique. The teacher speaking English asked the students to read a sentence from the reading passage one by one. After the students finished reading the passage, they were asked in English whether they had any questions. If they had questions about the vocabulary of the passage, the teacher tried to make clear its meaning using pictures, drawing on the board, giving examples.

After all of the questions were answered, the teacher asked some questions of her own about the passage. The question and answer practice continued for a few minutes. Finally the teacher invited

students to ask questions. All of the questions and answers were in English language. The students practiced vocabulary by using words in complete sentences.

To investigate the effect of the combination of the two independent variables of the teaching technique and the level of proficiency (beginner and intermediate) on reading comprehension a Two-way ANOVA was applied.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

At the end of the teaching period a final achievement test was taken. It consisted of some unfamiliar reading passages which were suitable for the students with different level of language proficiency. After the administration of the test, the collected data were scored. The test included 40 reading comprehension questions from four unfamiliar reading comprehension texts.

To investigate whether there was any meaningful difference between the four groups a Two-way ANOVA was run to estimate the effect of combination of translation and level of proficiency on the students' reading comprehension.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

In order to investigate the results, the first step was to specify four distinct groups as:

- G1: No translation, Beginner (Cont. Group1)
- G2: No translation, Intermediate (Cont. Group2)
- G3: Using translation, Beginner (Exp. Group1)
- G4: Using translation, intermediate (Exp. Group2)

As it was mentioned previously, at the end of the teaching period, all of the learners participated at a final achievement test according to their level of proficiency.

The initial step to the analysis of the collected data was to investigate the significant differences among the groups. Means and standard deviations of the groups are presented in Table 1.

**TABLE1  
MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF TWO INDEPENDENT VARIABLES**

ID1	ID2	M	SD	N
G1	beg.	28.93	2.567	30
G2	inter.	29.53	2.501	30
Total		29.24	2.529	60
G3	beg.	30.10	3.144	30
G4	inter.	28.80	2.797	30
Total		29.45	3.022	60
Total	beg.	29.55	2.890	60
	inter.	29.17	2.656	60
Total		29.36	2.771	120

To determine whether or not there is a relationship between the method of teaching and the level of proficiency on the reading comprehension of the participants a two-way ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) was implied. Table 2 shows the results.

**TABLE 2**  
**TWO-WAY ANOVA FOR ID1 AND ID2**

Source	DF	MS	F	Sig.
ID1	2	.932	.122	.886
ID2	1	3.562	.465	.497
ID1*ID2	1	26.734	3.490	.041
Error	11	7.659		
Total	12			
	0			

The findings indicated that the interaction of the two independent variables was significant at .05 ( $P < .05$ ). Therefore, the interaction of teaching methods and the level of proficiency affected learners' reading comprehension.

The present study confirms Rivers and Temperly's (1978) finding that translation of passages from literature in their first language (L1) offers students of English as a foreign language (EFL) a unique opportunity to explore the dimensions of both languages and to develop their skills and style of written expression in English. In an EFL setting, translation instruction can be an informative and instructive chance for students as well as serve as a tool for language learning. As EFL students are deeply engaged with the meaning of the literary text and its meaning through the translation process, they increase their awareness and understanding of their own society and culture. Moreover, they learn to extend their knowledge and understanding of other peoples, cultures, and issues.

## CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

As this study indicated, translation had positive effect on reading comprehension of EFL learners at the intermediate level of language proficiency. The results of a Two-way Analysis of Variance proposed that the combination of the method of teaching and the level of proficiency did have positive effect on learners' reading comprehension. One interpretation is that "mental translation during L2 reading may facilitate the generation and conservation of meaning by allowing the reader to represent portions of L2 text that exceed cognitive limits in a familiar, memory-efficient form" (Kern, 1994, p. 1).

This study has undoubtedly pedagogical implications both from the stand point of theory and practice. This research has shed some light, to a certain extent, on the factors involved in teaching a second or foreign language. Teachers can use translation for comprehending the reading part of the book that they teach.

The results will also alert teachers to consider translation as an important device for promoting reading comprehension. Teachers have to consider this point that learners translate the reading text unintentionally in order to comprehend them because it is easy for them to think in one language than another and so the brain automatically shifts languages.

As using translation is inevitable, it is suggested that teachers teach the learners some basic elements of translation before starting the reading comprehension passages. Teachers are also responsible for observing different traits in their classrooms and make learners aware of their own problems on translation, while encouraging them to work more on their problems. As learners may translate some sentences in classes, the teachers should create such an atmosphere in the classroom to make learners feel self-confident and secure to express themselves freely. Therefore, teachers have very important roles to help the learners comprehend the passages. They have a positive and influential effect on the emotional state of the students, too.

The results of this research are also beneficial to teachers in their selection, presentation and gradation of reading materials. The fact that learners in each level of proficiency use translation for comprehending the reading passages would be of prime importance for material developers. The materials should not be beyond the learners' ability. In this case the learners would recognize their talents to handle the new materials.

As far as the learners' comprehending of the new texts may affect their learning a second or foreign language, the presentation of the materials would be of prime importance. The presentation should be in a way to enhance the learners' self-concept while they go further in the path of language learning. Material developers can provide different techniques for presenting materials in the textbooks regarding the skill of reading comprehension and other related skills. An analysis of affective and personality factors will determine how the individuals will probably respond to emotional, cognitive and interpersonal demands of language learning.

One goal of instruction would be to help learners identify and assess their individual learning. At one stream, the students would be able to justify their progress in language learning by themselves. This is partly due to the concept that they have about themselves. They should know themselves in order to assess their improvement, or to find out the changes created in them by the process of education. At another stream no formal education would be possible without some form of testing. The fact that the learners' feelings and assumptions about themselves affect their response to language tests should not be overlooked by language testing authorities. The length of the tests, the time required for completing the tests and the level of difficulty of the tests are the factors which influence how successful the learners will be in the process of testing. A learner with a positive self-concept would be more aware of his or her capabilities and would feel more confident while language testing. On the other hand, a student with low self-concept, though knowledgeable, may not feel confident enough to complete the test easily. Therefore, in the process of the learners' assessment many factors namely personal factors are involved. Teachers or testing authorities are responsible to create such an atmosphere for learners to feel secure and confident while language testing.

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