



Learning Grammar through Learning to Translate: A Means and an End

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Introduction

With historical links to the much-criticised grammar translation method (GTM), the use of translation as a method in language teaching has long been marginalised. Originally utilised to study ‘dead languages’ and promote intellectuality through ‘mental gymnastics’ (Dakowska, 2005, p. 18-19), GTM has often been regarded as unsuitable for teaching students how to communicate in an additional language (L2). Apart from its use of decontextualized sentences, it is often argued that the translation process, with its constant reference to the first language (L1), inevitably results in negative outcomes for language learners. Perceived impacts include hindering of more spontaneous L2 use, entrenching a reliance on L1 in L2 production, and creating a constant source of language interference.

However, as recent reassessments have shown, negative views against the use of translation are often not supported by empirical evidence (Carreres, 2014; Cook, 2010). One common misconception is that translation is not a communicative act and therefore does not suit communicative approaches to language teaching (Duff, 1989). This misconception overlooks one of the original functions of translation as a means to bridge communication divides across languages and cultures. Another criticism is that translation encourages word for word transfer of meaning, and hence creates unnatural L2 forms. However, this ignores the actual practice of translation in which, apart from limited purposes such as glossing for syntactic analyses, literal translation is discouraged. Translation is in fact, ‘a complex skill which entails different pragmatic considerations of a text and therefore cannot be reduced to a mere change of linguistic forms to transfer meaning’ (Murtisari, 2016, p. 103).

A third criticism is that as translation is often considered as ‘an end’ in itself, it is viewed as an unsuitable ‘means’ for language learning (Carreres, 2014). However, as learning to translate and learning a language share the common goal of learning to communicate, they cannot be dissociated from each other (ibid.). The fact that good translation demands accuracy of meaning and naturalness of expression does not necessarily exclude its suitability for use in modern language teaching. As Machida (2011) suggests, translation can assist students to acquire new knowledge (L2) by making connections with their

prior knowledge through the observations and discussions that are prompted by the translation process. This is in alignment with the constructivist perspective of language learning in which language learning is not considered a passive and unidirectional process (the learner internalising outside knowledge), but rather an active process in which learners are cognitively engaged in combining and reorganising new and prior knowledge (Richards & Rogers, 2014). As Machida (2011) argues, translation provides students opportunities to incorporate prior experiences as they construct knowledge and engage in higher cognitive processes such as ‘reflecting on the problem and/or their own learning and searching for solutions’ (p. 741). This is facilitated by the fact that the semantic and pragmatic incompatibilities across languages require the translator to continuously negotiate meaning in order to communicate effectively in the L2.

Through continuous engagement and negotiation of meaning between the L1 and L2, learners can also increase their awareness of differences between the two, a process which may assist grammar learning. According to Cook (2010, p.55), ‘[o]nly through [such] conscious awareness of differences’ can learners make appropriate decisions in negotiating meaning interlingually for different contexts, audiences and needs. Instead of giving rise to interferences, translation may help learners to arrive at more natural forms in the L2. Furthermore, by producing the L2 in complete chunks, translation may also benefit learners as it encourages deeper engagement at a semantic/pragmatic level compared to the use of ‘trigger-structure associations’; such as by modifying the main verbs into particular tenses and other cloze exercises (Salem, 2012). As Salem (ibid.) points out, while the use of cues in ‘trigger-structure association’ is widely used in traditional grammar learning, it is problematic because in real life ‘language is not normally elicited by triggers’ but ‘it is produced to convey meaning’ (pp. 147-148). In other words, grammar does not stand alone in communication – it is closely linked with the elicitation of vocabulary. These combine to produce the semantic and pragmatic aspects of the utterance.

Despite translation’s potential benefits, ideas on how to use it to enhance students’ language acquisition of grammar are currently limited. Versions of GTM where language is approached at the sentence level still appear dominant and there is a need to explore ‘the benefits of creative and communicative ways of making translation a useful and practical learning activity’ (Pym, Malmkjaer, & Gutiérrez-Colon, 2013, p. 16). Therefore, this study aimed to describe how learning to translate in an introductory translation unit may serve as an opportunity for tertiary students to learn grammar. With the aim of teaching students the basic skills of translating across different genres, this unit was shown to be effective at providing insights into how L1 and L2 work differently and to enable students to learn grammar in authentic communicative contexts.

The Study

The Context of the Study

This qualitative study was carried out in an undergraduate English language education program at a university in Central Java, Indonesia. Taking the form of action research, it aimed to investigate how an introductory translation unit could assist tertiary EFL students in learning L2 grammar; that is, how L2 words may be combined according to specific rules and applied meaningfully in a communicative context.

Participants

The fifteen participants comprised three intermediate, seven upper-intermediate, and five post-intermediate students. They were recruited as a cluster on a convenience basis from an available heterogenous class taught by one research team member.

Instrument and Data Collection

Students were given approximately 90 minutes at the end of the course to write their reflections in response to the following prompts:

1. Have you learnt anything about grammar through the translation unit? If you have, what have you learnt?
2. If you have learnt grammar through translation in the unit, how did you do it?
3. Would you be interested in learning grammar more in this way? Explain.

This was not done anonymously to enable the researchers to follow up on any comments that required clarification or elaboration. In order to avoid bias, the participants were given a short briefing before they wrote their reflections to explain the significance of the research as well as the value in obtaining their authentic voice. It was made clear that they should write their reflections freely and honestly and that their points of view would not affect their grades. Three brief follow-ups were made to clarify three students' reflections.

Data Analysis

Two research team members analyzed the reflections by categorizing students' responses and emerging themes through close and repeated reading. The analysis was first done by one researcher and cross-checked by the other. Any inconsistency was resolved through a mutual review of the data.

The Learning Unit

The three-credit translation course had the following objectives: (1) teach students the basic skills of translating across different genres; (2) develop students' interlingual awareness, especially about differences between Indonesian and English; and (3) improve students' ability to express themselves in English. The overarching learning outcome was to teach translation as a skill (as an end) and as a means of language learning. Indonesian, the national language, is typologically very different from English. The former, for instance, does not have grammatical tenses and aspects like English. Such differences present a specific challenge to Indonesian students in learning English grammar. Furthermore, the translation unit was taught over a 14-week period in which the first four weeks were spent exploring five foundational concepts in translation. These concepts are: a) translation as a form of communication, b) lexical incompatibilities across languages, c) translation strategies for dealing with differences (e.g. translating using a more general word and paraphrasing), d) translating based on 'skopos' or purpose of communication, and e) the global features of English as opposed to Indonesian. Skopos theory stipulates that the manner of translating is governed by the function of the TT, including aspects such as the goal of the communication, media, and new readership (Nord, 2006). In other words, the unit explicitly instructed students in dealing with the pragmatic aspects of communication when translating texts, which goes beyond a mere transfer of semantic meaning.

Building on these initial weeks of theoretical foundation, the remainder of the unit was allocated to exploring ways to translate three different types of texts (manuals, tourist texts and academic texts) and engagement in graded exercises (three group tasks and two individual ones). The translation activity for the first genre was from English into Indonesian in order to scaffold students' understanding of how translation works. The remaining translation activities were from Indonesian to English.

Each session on translating a specific type of genre (approximately 150 minutes) consisted of the following activities:

1. Reading a short parallel Indonesian or English text (approx.250-350 words) that is juxtaposed

alongside its translation (approx. 30 minutes). The parallel texts were created from authentic materials such as actual product manuals, advertisements, and academic journal articles; all selected based on the content's relevance to students' needs and the language level difficulty. Students read the parallel text silently and then participated in a reading aloud session where students took turns reading the text chunk by chunk; first the source text then the translation. This allowed students to familiarize themselves with the parallel text, which also served as their translation model. Students were asked for their comments on anything of interest in the parallel text, and then the class discussed the general aspects in relation to the *skopos* of the translation (purpose of communication, media and readership).

2. Individual vocabulary exercises in which students were required to find the translation or source text of words or short phrases in the parallel text (approx. 15 minutes including discussion). By highlighting unfamiliar expressions, this activity was aimed at assisting students to notice further details of the parallel text and identify functional synonyms of words and phrases.
3. Analysis of particular translation strategies (15-20 minutes). Here students wrote down the translation of several parts of the source text and identified the strategies of rendering by looking at the difference(s) between the source and target text (TT). The aim was to introduce common translation techniques in order to negotiate meaning when L1 is incompatible with L2, or to accommodate different readership. One example of the strategies was implicitation (making what is explicit in the source text implicit in the TT).
4. Language focus to discuss linguistic characteristics of the genre and/or a specific grammatical construction that commonly appears in the genre (20-30 minutes). For example, for translating tourist texts, there was a discussion on present participle phrases for more stylistic descriptions, followed by an exercise of translating the form in focus at sentence level. Students were sometimes provided with more natural L2 expressions so they could focus on the targeted L2 form rather than struggling with difficult vocabulary.
5. Translation exercise (approx. 45 minutes) and discussion (approx. 20-30 minutes). In groups of three to four, students were asked to translate a similar text into English and discuss the translation together. The teacher asked for alternatives of the translation of short chunks from different groups and commented on them before giving her own model of translation.

With the communicative task-based nature of the translation activities and grammatical feedback students received from the language focus and translation exercises, the unit allowed for what may be called an *interlingual Focus on Form* (cf. Machida, 2008, 2011). Originally coined by Michael Long (1991, 2016), the concept of focus on form (FonF) may be defined as 'various techniques designed to attract learners' attention to form while they are using the L2 as a tool for communicating' (Ellis, 2016, p. 5). This approach is in contrast with *Focus on Forms* (FonFs) or the traditional isolated grammar teaching (Long, 1991, 2016) where the focus is on the teaching of discrete grammatical items with normally limited communicative content. While both are complementary in language learning, exposure to natural L2 use in FonF provides students practice in applying L2 grammar in more realistic communicative contexts. Through the process of translating authentic texts, students are also engaged with L1 in interlingual FonF and this can assist students to appreciate the semantic/pragmatic aspects of L2 form more fully, while still sharing the same goal of facilitating students' acquisition of L2 form through authentic communicative tasks.

For the assessment, students were given graded exercises (for group and individual work) where they were required to translate texts of the genres taught. Assessment was based on the accuracy, naturalness and coherence of the translation and accommodation of the text's *skopos* (where relevant). Feedback given to students included grammatical points. The evaluation was benchmarked to a high standard, but below what is normally expected of professional translators.

Results and Discussion

In general, the results of the analysis of the students' reflections demonstrated that they had benefited from the introductory translation unit in terms of grammar learning. However, while most would like to learn grammar more through translation, three less proficient students reported some challenges.

Q1 Have you learnt anything about grammar through the translation unit? If so, what have you learnt?

All students (15) gave positive responses to this guiding question. Four students mentioned that it developed their awareness of the role of grammar in communication.

After learning grammar through translation, I understood that learning grammar is important. Why? If I have good grammar, it will be easier for me to express my ideas clearly, especially in English. It will also be easier for others to understand what I want to say. (Yl)

I liked the fact that there was language focus because it has increased my awareness of the importance of grammar. (Ylt)

The discussions of students' translations and language focus sessions may have helped students to see how specific grammatical forms can create particular effects, and how the use of incorrect grammar may create confusion. In translating tourist texts, it was discussed that in order to attract potential tourists, it is important to make the text aesthetically appealing, and this partly comes from the choice of grammatical forms.

Two students believed they could learn how various grammatical forms are used through reading the parallel texts. One student commented that:

With the readings [parallel texts], I found out when to use the [simple] past tense, for instance, but with the correct [...] structure. I not only learnt about tenses but also about how to use pronouns, nouns, verbs, adjectives, prepositions, conjunctions, and so on. (Sh)

Furthermore, five students believed that they learnt how to apply grammar in context, which was made possible by the weekly translation practice that followed the foundational session.

[In this unit] I applied the grammar directly when translating a text. This is different from the way I previously studied [grammar] in which I just got an explanation [about the forms] and then did exercises. (Nad)

In this unit I studied grammar at one level above the Basic or Intermediate Grammar units. [...] I think this unit helped me to improve my understanding of grammar because [it taught me] how to use grammar appropriately in discourse. (Ang)

In addition to the above benefits, five students suggested that the unit also assisted them to communicate more effectively by considering the pragmatic aspects.

I used to think the better a piece of writing the more academic the grammar would be. However, I learnt here that it all depends on the target reader and purpose of writing. (Jo)

I learnt how to use grammar that was suitable with the context and target reader, which was difficult to do. (Ve)

In order not to bore the reader and to make our translation interesting, I must really pay attention to the language I use. (Sh)

Q2 If you have learnt grammar through translation in the unit, how did you do it?

When asked to reflect on how they had learnt grammar in the unit, most students (11) wrote that they had benefited from the language focus. Students believed the integrated session enabled them to learn how to use specific grammar items commonly used in various genres directly in authentic contexts. In addition, seven students reported to have learnt grammar from comparing the L1 and L2 texts in the parallel texts. Some comments suggesting this are as follows:

I always looked at and read the translation samples [(the parallel texts)] and compared how the English and Indonesian texts were written. In this way I found [how] past forms, present forms etc. [are used]. (In)

I felt L1 made it easier to learn grammar because I was able to see the differences [between L1 and L2] clearly. (Am)

It made me understand differences between the structure of my mother tongue and that of the foreign language and this is not something trivial as their structures are very different. (Jer)

Students also reported that they learnt grammar through translation practice (5) and reproducing forms (2). Commenting on the latter, one student said:

I have learnt more about grammar. When I found a sentence [to translate], I could learn from a similar one I had come across before. (Ve)

Learning by such reproduction was made possible by the genre-based approach of the unit, in which students always practiced translating at least two texts (regular and graded) similar to the parallel text they had studied. The last two ways of learning show that students' L1 may assist language learning instead of creating interference as it is commonly assumed. The presence of the mother tongue may illuminate characteristics of the new language and assist students to produce more natural forms in the TL.

In addition, three students said they were able to study grammar indirectly through the translation unit. For students who do not like studying grammatical rules, this may be very helpful, as two students pointed out below:

I was happy to learn grammar in this way because it was wrapped in translation. So, I studied grammar without realizing it. (Kris)

Studying grammar through translation helped me to learn grammar more easily. I didn't have to study 'rules' but I was able to apply it directly in a context. (Am)

Q3 Would you be interested in learning grammar more in this way? Explain.

Most students (12) wrote positive reflections on whether or not they would be interested in learning grammar through translating in context. In general, they believed it was easier for them to learn grammar because they could learn it indirectly through observing differences between L1 and L2 texts and applying it in expanded contexts (discourse). Some students (5) wrote they were able to understand the meaning of grammatical items more easily with the help of their mother tongue:

There was clarity in our study of grammar – we really understood [...] the meaning. (Kris)
Learning with the help of L1, I was able to understand things clearly because I did not have to rely on the lecturer's explanation for the meaning [of the construction]. (Ind)

Two students mentioned translation helped them to retain their knowledge of grammar more easily.

Having done the [translation] unit, I feel interested in studying grammar through translating because I want to be more facilitated by grammar learning which helps me to remember and understand the forms more easily. (Yul)

Translating a text is a pretty effective way for me to learn grammar. Before I translated the passage, I had to read it very carefully. [In this way], my knowledge turned out to last longer. This is interesting as I am forgetful. (Sha)

According to one student (Yul), she was able to remember things better because of the problem-solving nature of the practice of translating in discourse. As is suggested by the constructivist view of language learning (Machida, 2011; Richards & Rogers, 2014), there was more cognitive engagement when working with meaning making required for translating, which then assisted students to retain information related to grammar. However, other factors may have been at play, such as repeated practice in translating similar texts.

In spite of the positive views, three students with lower proficiency noted that while they did learn more about grammar through the unit, they would prefer to learn grammar in other ways. Two students suggested it was not easy to focus on grammar while translating because there were other aspects they had also to deal with. One student wrote:

In this unit I learnt grammar directly from texts but I think it was a little difficult because there were a lot of things I had to pay attention to and study, like language style, appropriate word choice, and use of grammar. [...]. I'd like to learn grammar more deeply through translation, but I think I need to first learn more vocabulary and grammatical rules. (Ang)

Another student wrote that she found the language focus challenging and that learning in isolated grammar classes would be more helpful. She suggested:

Better separate the lessons in different courses. [...] It was already difficult to find proper words for the translation, let alone thinking about 'adjective clauses'.

Such less positive responses highlight the fact that translation is a complex activity that requires various sub-skills and therefore can be challenging to less competent students. Scaffolding seemed to be necessary in the context of a heterogenous classroom like in the present study in order to assist such students.

Conclusion

The current study adds to the dialogue on re-evaluating the use of translation in language teaching by adding the perspectives of students studying EFL in an Indonesian higher education institution. The findings suggest that students felt they had benefited from the explicit study of translation as a skill of interlingual communication and that this learning may not be limited to sentence level understanding. The process of comparing and evaluating texts in two languages appeared to heighten students' awareness of grammatical structures, something they felt helped improve their accuracy when using English.

However, student responses also suggest that while more competent students appeared to benefit from exposure to slightly more complex texts, this may not be as effective for less proficient students. To assist such students, the language of the texts need to be tailored to suit their level of ability. For a heterogenous classroom, scaffolding through the provision of more L2 synonyms of difficult words and expressions may assist them in completing the translation task. Such a list could be provided for study before class. The language focus should also be made less complex and more practical to cater for students with different abilities.

There are limitations to this action research that need to be considered. Firstly, as a study of fifteen students in one unit, the results cannot be generalized beyond the specific research context. Secondly, as the teaching in the unit and the research process was conducted by the same person, it cannot be assumed that students felt completely free to provide genuine feedback. While acknowledging these limitations, such studies may help narrow the gap between translation as a means and as an end where translation training and language learning are combined for the common goal of helping students to learn to communicate.

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