The Positive Effect of Translation on Improving Reading Comprehension among Female Arabic Learners of English as Foreign Language

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Abstract
Translation has been one of the most commonly used strategies in learning an additional language. Although there is not a consensus on the usefulness of translation as a language learning strategy, the relevant literature indicated that it could contribute to the learning process when used purposefully and meaningfully. The present study aimed to explore the role of translation in supporting the language learning process by adopting an experimental design to reveal whether engaging in translation practice could improve participants' skills in reading comprehension. In this scope, 30 female students at Taif University in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia were randomly assigned to the experimental group and received an intervention by translating reading passages before carrying out comprehension tasks. On the other hand, the 28 female students in the control group practiced reading comprehension without completing a translation task before the comprehension activities. An independent samples t-test was used to measure the extent to which the two groups differed from each other in terms of their reading comprehension skills before and after the intervention. The results of the independent samples t-tests demonstrated that the experimental group scored significantly higher than the control group at the end of the intervention, although there was not a statistically significant difference between the two groups at the outset. The results suggested that translation could be an effective instructional strategy in improving learners' skills in reading comprehension in an EFL setting.

Keywords: Comprehension, reading, teaching English as a Foreign Language, translation, Arabic learners of English

Introduction

The extent to which learners should be allowed to use or benefit from their knowledge of the first language has been debated for decades (Flege, Bohn & Jang, 1997; Keck, 2006; Sparks & Ganschow, 1993; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2003; Wach & Monroy, 2020; Wang & Wen, 2002). In some circles, the use of the native language has turned into a taboo and its use in the classroom, no matter what the purpose is, was labelled as one of the worst things a learner of another language could do (Sali, 2014). This view supported the notion that both the teacher and learners in the classroom are supposed to use the target language for both instructional and communicational purposes. A contrary perspective argued that even though the use of the first language in a language teaching classroom may not offer benefits superior than those offered by the communicative use of the target language, the first language could still offer considerable benefits when used in cooperation with the target language through a meaningful and purposeful approach (Joyce, 2018).

Auerbach (1993) argued that the sole use of the target language in the classroom was related to ideological and historical conceptions that were not evidence based. It was also argued that there was no scientific evidence indicating that the use of the native language when learning an additional language leads to detrimental effects on the learning process (Shin, Dixon & Choi, 2020). On the contrary, many studies have found positive effects of the use of the first language on the language learning process when used purposefully and meaningfully (Ma, 2019; Marton & MacIntyre, 2020; Pavón-Vázquez & Ramos-Ordóñez, 2019; Tsagari & Giannikas, 2020). Nevertheless, this does not mean the teaching of a target language should be based entirely on the first language. Especially the third circle countries (Kachru, 1990), where exposure to English as the most commonly learnt foreign language is limited to the classroom context and students have only few opportunities to practice the target language in their daily lives, the use of the target language in the classroom offers the exposure opportunities learners need to learn. In this process, the use of the first language should aim to reinforce the learning process by facilitating the relevant processes students are involved in (Ma, 2019).

In this context, the present study aims to understand the role of translation across native language and target language in supporting the foreign language learning process. In more detail, this study will explore whether the use of the first language through translating reading passages from the target language (English) into the native language (Arabic) before carrying out reading comprehension tasks resulted in a statistically significant performance difference between two groups of female learners learning English as a foreign language By achieving this objective, the present study can contribute to the international literature on translation and language learning by demonstrating the extent of support translation offers in the language learning process. Thus, the research question that guided this study was as follows:

1. Does translating reading comprehension passages into learners' native language prior to working on comprehension tasks lead to significant differences in reading comprehension among female learners at the same proficiency level?

The remainder of this paper will present a review of the relevant literature, detail the research methods employed to collect and analyse the data needed to answer the research question, present the results that emerged from the statistical analysis of the data collected, discuss the results in

light of the relevant literature, and finally, conclude with a subjective insight on the research subject and future directions for research on translation and language learning.

Literature Review

For long years, the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) has embraced teaching approaches and methods that focused on the study of four language skills (speaking, writing, listening, and reading) together (Burns & Siegel, 2018; Hinkel, 2006; Selinker & Tom/in, 1986). That being the case, reading has received greater interest from both scholars and learners due to several reasons (Mason & Krashen, 1997; Proctor, August, Carlo & Snow, 2005; Van Staden, 2011). The increased focus on reading also required a more intensive inquiry into how learners could read passages in a foreign language to arrive at higher levels in language proficiency. In this context, translation emerged as an instructional approach that aimed to enhance language learners' academic performance in reading and help them clear strong links between their first language and the native language (Malmkjær, 2010).

The initial practice of translation in language classrooms relied heavily on the translation of literary texts into and from the first language in order to improve the knowledge of vocabulary and grammar (Richards, Richards, Rodgers & Coaut, 2001). Similarly, the focus of translation during the learning process was on memorizing target structures – vocabulary in particular – and make comparisons between the grammatical structure of the first language and the target language. In this sense, learners without an advanced level of knowledge were required to translate literary texts at a professional level. This practice proved to be not as useful as the scholars of the era had expected it to be, was difficult for learners to progress through, and made the learning process a lot more challenging and demanding than it normally should be. Richards et al. (2001) also argued that the certain practices regarding the use of translation in language classrooms that did not have a firm pedagogical foundation led to a hesitation into the use of the first language for language learning purposes, and hence, many approaches to language teaching as well as the techniques and methods developed for language teaching purposes almost exclusively ignored the role the first language might play in the learning of an additional language.

In this context, translation has been a highly debated practice within language learning and teaching circles (Carreres & Noriega-Sánchez, 2011; Garcia & Pena, 2011; Malmkjær, 2010; Widdowson, 2014). Nonetheless, although it has appeared as an unfavourable technique for language readers, it has also been found to be positively contributing to students in learning a language. Pym, Malmkjær, and Gutiérrez-Colon (2013) conducted a large-scale mixed-methods study to understand how the countries in the European Union approached translation in their language teaching policies and practices by comparing the results to those in three non-member countries in different continents (Australia, China, and the USA). Based on the results of a survey administered to 963 scholars and teachers across the European Union and interviews conducted with 101 respondents, they found that most teachers living in European countries do not favour translation as a learning and teaching technique as it hinders communicative activities in the language classroom. Most institutions also demand to work with teachers that act like a native speaker of the target language, which means all notions of the native language are usually overlooked in the learning of the target language. However, the study revealed this preference was not backed by evidence:

> [W]e have found no strong empirical evidence that communicative uses of translation in the L2 classroom have a detrimental effect on language learning, whereas there is empirical evidence that translation can enhance the learning of an L2, particularly writing skills in both L1 and L2 (Pym, Malmkjær & Gutierrez-Colon., 2013, p. 5).

In other words, the results presented evidence that translation does not hinder communicative activities in the classroom and does not lead to negative consequences in the learning process.

Other studies also revealed that translation might result in positive gains in learning to read in an additional language. To understand the role of translation activities in improving reading comprehension, Lee (2013) conducted a study with English major and non-English major students. Both groups started the experiment by reading a passage in the target language (English). They translated the passage into their native language (Chinese), and finally, they took a reading comprehension test of five multiple choice questions, three of which were directly related to the paragraphs they translated, whereas the other two concerned other paragraphs. The results revealed that the participants had a higher score in questions that were related to the paragraphs they had translated. More specifically, the mean score on these three questions was 86.4 for English major students and 88.9 for non-English major students. However, on the other two questions that they had not translated into their native language, the mean score was 35.3 for English major students and 44.4 for non-English major students. They argued that because translation required a thorough and extensive comprehension of the passage, the students had higher comprehension scores on the sections they translated.

In a similar study with 70 first-year university students, Sakurai (2015) found that whether students translated a text before reading it led to significant changes in their amount of reading, in their overall proficiency level (as determined by post-tests), and their speed in reading. He argued that reading without translating could be challenging for learners who are used to translating in their earlier experiences as students. In another study investigating the effect of extensive reading and translation on the grammar knowledge of adolescent EFL learners, Lee, Schallert, and Kim (2015) administered a grammar test to two groups of adolescent EFL learners in South Korea, one of whom had studied extensive reading and the other translation for two academic terms. The results revealed that students with extensive reading and translation backgrounds did not have statistically significantly different performance levels from the pre-test to the post-test. The authors argued that translation was as effective as extensive reading as a technique to improve reading skills. They also found that students practicing extensive reading showed a decrease in their attitude towards reading, whereas those conducting translation activities experienced an increase in their attitude at all levels.

Studies mentioned so far indicated that students can improve their reading skills utilizing the power of translation. Moreover, the relevant literature also shows that engaging in intensive and extensive reading skills also support students' translation skills, which, in turn, further reinforces their reading skills. For example, Sriwantaneeyakul (2018) carried out a mixed methods study to reveal the relationship between translation ability and students' critical reading skills by testing the translations made by students with superior critical reading skills and those with lower critical reading skills. The study revealed a statistically significant difference between accuracy of

translation made by the two groups. Also, it was found that students with superior critical reading skills produced translation outputs that were more accurate. The author concluded that because translation requires comprehensive knowledge of the native and target language, those who were better in critical reading were also better in translation.

Recent studies also revealed that translation practice could improve language skills in various domains. In a study that aimed to explore the perceptions of ESP learners about translation activities as language learning devices, Olivia (2018) found that most students held highly positive attitudes towards engaging in translation practice in the learning process. The results revealed that students reported considerable gains in terms of overall proficiency, grammar, and vocabulary. In a similar vein, Skopeckova (2018) argued that employing the Functional Approach could make translation activities beneficial for the foreign language classroom. She suggested that translation could help learners experience and question the structural function of the target language and hence increase their awareness of how the target language forms work when constructing real messages for communicative purposes:

> Translation activities might be easily integrated into the foreign language classroom, when learners practise textual changes and are asked to transform texts and sentences employing a new grammatical phenomenon or in a more advanced context with respect to the change of the [target text] function. Students might thus discuss which transformations are necessary to comply with the new function and which [source text] elements need to be adapted and how (Skopeckova, 2008, p. 15).

Furthermore, it was also found that machine translation could play a significant role in improving language learners' skills. Pointing out that most teachers are still concerned about the quality and effectiveness of students' using machine translation tools (e.g., Google Translate), Lee (2021) carried out a meta-analysis study on how effective those tools could be in foreign language education by reviewing relevant studies published between 2000 and 2019. The results indicated that there was an increasing number of studies exploring the link between translation and language learning in recent years and that the majority of the studies indicated highly positive impact of using machine translation for language learning purposes, especially in writing activities. Finally, Pintado-Gutierrez (2018) argued that the link between translation and language learning will never disappear and that all stakeholders should actively look for strategies through which this link can be utilized to create more positive effects on the language learning process. She also suggested that because the focus on a single language is neither realistic nor sustainable, "it is necessary to capture the change in the landscape of translation within the classroom and beyond" (Pintado-Gutierrez, 2018, p. 235).

These studies demonstrated that, despite maintaining its status as one of the most controversial techniques in the history of teaching and learning languages, translation could serve as a useful activity provided that it is used purposefully and meaningfully. Moreover, in the current context of increased focus on concepts such as translanguaging (Baynham & Lee, 2019), multiculturalism (Stahuljak, 2004), and the rise of the non-native speaker as a legitimate owner of the target language (Kramsch & Lam, 1999), translation serves as a valuable tool that can help unite the social aspect with which native and target languages are associated with (Berman, 1992).

The present study addresses the negative attitudes towards translation that have led to a misconception suggesting that teaching a foreign language through translation teaching technique that is not only useless but also causes negative consequences in learners' improving their language skills. Nevertheless, this review of literature pointed out that these conceptions are not backed by research and that more empirical research is needed to reveal how translation can be used to boost the learning experiences of EFL learners and enhance their relevant skills. In this regard, this aimed to explore the impact of practicing reading comprehension by translating passages on improving EFL learners' skills in reading.

Methods

This study adopted an experimental design by administering a pre-test before the intervention and a post-test after the intervention. A pretest-posttest control group design is characterized by a measurement of two sample groups that are at a similar level as indicated by a pre-test administered before the outset of an interventional period during which one of the groups is exposed to the focus of the intervention whereas the other group continues their day-to-day operations without being exposed to the intervention (Dugard & Todman, 1995). At the end, the two groups who were at a similar level at the outset are tested again after the intervention to see if the intervention created a statistically significant difference between the two groups at the end of the research process (Marsden & Torgerson, 2012).

In this context, the present study utilized a pretest-posttest control group design with two sample groups who were at the same level at the outset of the study as revealed by a reading comprehension test. Considering the research aim, which focuses on understanding the effect of translation practices in improving students' reading comprehension scores, this design was chosen to reveal whether an interventional process that involved the experimental group practicing reading by translating passages into their first language would lead to a statistically significant difference between the two groups at the end of the process in terms of their academic performance in terms of reading comprehension in the target language.

Participants

The participants of the study were 58 learners of English as a Foreign Language studying at Taif University in Saudi Arabia in the 2020-2021 academic year. The learners were all females and first-year students in the English language program of the Department of Foreign Languages at the university. The missions of the department where the participants study include improving learners' English language skills in written and oral communication, providing opportunities for learners to acquire critical thinking and analytical skills necessary to explore the various aspects of the English language, providing learners with the knowledge and experienced required to translate literary texts across languages, improving learners' relevant skills in using English for their day-to-day affairs, and equipping learners with English language skills sufficient to make them act as independent users in their personal and professional affairs.

The experimental group and the control group were located in two different classes at the same grade level, and both classes taught by the researcher throughout the research process. Within the intervention program, whereas the learners in the experimental group (n=30) were asked to read a passage in the target language and translate it into their first language before starting to work

on reading comprehension activities, those in the control group (n=28) followed the traditional approach at the school by working on reading comprehension activities right after reading a passage in the target language. In this context, the present study adopted the convenience sampling approach as the learners were located in classes taught by the author and "they [were] 'convenient' sources of data for researchers" (Lavrakas, 2008, p. 149).

Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

The data for the present study were collected in two stages. The pre-test examination, which was administered in early November 2020 to reveal whether there was a statistically significant difference between the reading comprehension performances of the two groups at the outset of the study, included 10 questions that aimed to assess the extent to which the participants were able to comprehend the passage adopted from a textbook published by a famous publishing house serving in the field of Teaching English as a Foreign Languages for decades.

The post-test examination was administered in late December 2020, approximately 8 weeks after the administration of the pre-test to reveal whether the intervention led to a statistically significant difference between the reading comprehension performances of the two groups. Both groups received a reading comprehension test that included 20 questions that aimed to assess the skills of participants in comprehending a passage adopted from another textbook published by the same publishing house. The content in both textbooks were in accordance with the proficiency levels of the learners at the outset of the present study (B1+).

Data Analysis

The analysis of data collected through comprehensions tests were analyzed in several stages. First, the responses of learners to the reading comprehension tests that were administered as the pre-test and post-test were collected from the in-house learning management system. The final scores of participants on both tests were calculated on a Microsoft Excel sheet before moving them into an IBM SPSS document for subsequent analysis. The analysis of data involved the use of descriptive statistics on IBM SPSS to reveal the minimum and maximum scores, the mean score, and the standard deviation in each group on both administrations. Also, an independent samples t-test was administered on IBM SPSS to compare the results of the experimental and control group on the pre-test and the post-test.

Results

A reading comprehension task was administered to the experimental and control groups to measure the learners' reading skills before the intervention. Table One presents the results of this pre-test.

Table 1. *The results of the initial reading comprehension test (Pre-test)*

	Number of Learners	Minimum Score	Maximum Score	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
The experimental group	30	30	100	88.67	14.077
The control group	28	60	100	91.79	13.068

An independent samples t-test showed that the little difference between the mean scores in both groups was not statistically significant at the p<0.05 level (t(56)= -.873; p = .386). This result indicated that the control group, who did not receive the intervention, and the experimental group, who received the intervention by practicing reading through translation, were not at a statistically significantly different level in terms of reading comprehension at the outset of the intervention.

During the intervention, the experimental group translated the reading passages from the target language into their native language before starting with the comprehension and vocabulary tasks, whereas those in the control group followed the standard curriculum. The intervention lasted during 16 contact hours in 8 weeks. After the intervention, another reading comprehension test was administered to both groups as the post-test (Table Two) to assess whether the intervention led to a statistically significant difference.

Table 2. *The results of the final reading comprehension test (Post-test)*

	Number of Learners	Minimum Score	Maximum Score	Mean Score	Standard Deviation
The experimental group	30	40	100	82.17	16.541
The control group	28	40	95	70.89	15.873

An independent samples t-test showed that the difference between the mean scores in both groups was statistically significant at the p<0.05 level (t(56)= 2.645; p = .011). This result revealed that the experimental group scored significantly higher than the control group after the intervention, although there was not a statistically significant difference between the two groups before. In other words, this result demonstrates that the intervention, which was implemented as learners studied reading passages in the target language by translating them into their native languages, led to a statistically significant difference between the groups.

Discussion

Adopting an experimental design, the present study aimed to explore whether practicing reading by translating texts in the target language was an effective instructional strategy. The results revealed that the experimental group, who performed at a similar level to the control group at the outset of the study, outperformed the control group at a statistically significant level after receiving the intervention.

The results demonstrated that before the intervention process, in which the learners in the experimental group were asked to complete a translation exercise before carrying out the relevant reading comprehension exercises, the control group had a higher mean score on the initial reading comprehension test although the difference between the scores of the two groups was not statistically significant. However, after the intervention process, the experimental group achieved a mean score that was statistically significantly higher than that of the control group on the final reading comprehension test. This result showed that the translation practices that the learners in the experimental group were involved in supported their reading skills and strengthened their skills in comprehending reading passages in the target language.

In this context, this result supports the current strand of research on the effects of translation as an instructional strategy on improved learning outcomes in the learning of English as a foreign language. To illustrate, the present study supported the arguments in Pym et al. (2013) which opposed the notion that practicing language skills through activities that involve translation has a detrimental effect on the language learning process. This study further revealed that by engaging in translation activities in reading classes, the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group (which had a higher mean score on the pre-test even though the difference was not statistically significant) after being exposed to the intervention for eight weeks in sixteen classes. Furthermore, this study was in line with the results of Sakurai (2015), Lee, Schallert, and Kim (2015), Sriwantaneeyakul (2018) who had suggested that translation could offer a boost in the performance levels of EFL learners in reading comprehension. Also, the results were in parallel with Lee (2013), who had found that the learners in the experimental group who had practiced translation in their reading classes outperformed the control group both in translation tasks and tasks that inquired other aspects of reading comprehension.

This study supports the current evidence suggesting that the first language can be a valuable instrument in learning a foreign language. The reason why translation should be approached as a useful tool in the learning of an additional language relates to the nature of translation as an in-class activity. Learners who translate a text written in the target language into their first language oftentimes need to revisit their knowledge of two languages through a comparative and contrastive perspective (Neubert, 2000). This process provides them with a rich insight into how the two languages are similar and different in their structure (Skopeckova, 2018). Also, translation offers an opportunity to work on both input and output, both of which are crucial constructs in language learning processes due to their role in supporting and reinforcing learning.

In addition, it should be noted that the use of translation for language learning purposes should be built upon meaningful and purposeful foundations. Therefore, as Pintado-Gutierrez (2018) suggested, it is important that students understand why they are carrying out translation tasks in the classroom and how their language learning journeys can benefit from such tasks. Also, the tasks students are responsible for should be designed so that learners will be required to consciously utilize their knowledge and skills in the target language to complete the translation task rather then perceive the process as being automatic. Finally, authentic translation tasks that involve translating reading passages across native and target languages serve is comprehensible input at varying levels. In other words, as authentic texts, such materials include a wide range of variability in terms of vocabulary and target mechanics. Dealing with such materials, students have a valuable opportunity understand what vocabulary they know and what grammatical structures they can identify and comprehend. However, bearing in mind a realization of this kind might not be readily available to all learners, teachers should take the necessary measures for equipping learners with the ability of refection necessary to realize the gap in their knowledge of the target language.

The present study was intended as a first step to understanding and appreciating the value of translation in learning English as a foreign language. It attempts to provide evidence against the negative connotations of translation in language learning that resulted mostly from its association with techniques and methods of language teaching that focus on meaningless drills and rote

memorization of vocabulary items as well as grammatical structures. Nevertheless, when utilized purposefully and meaningfully, translation can emerge as a useful classroom strategy to support language learning, especially in foreign language contexts where the distribution of comprehensible and communicative input is limited to the language learning classroom and learners have little opportunity to being exposed to the target language outside of the school.

Finally, this study had a number of limitations. The primary limitation was that it was not possible to collect additional data on learners' perceptions of working on translation to improve their language skills. The plan at the outset of the study was to administer a survey to the sample group to find out what they liked about the translation practice, how they related the translation practice to their development in reading, and their relevant perceptions within the process. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the sudden closures it brought, administering the survey was not possible. Also, this limitation posed as a barrier to collecting information on participants' demographic characteristics (age, previous translation experience, years of studying English, etc.) and establishing the relationship between their demographic characteristics and their results on the pre-test and the post-test. The last limitation concerned the duration of the intervention period. The time available to investigate the research problem presented in this study was constrained due to the emergence of COVID-19 as a global threat. The intervention had to be stopped after eight weeks due to the school closures that resulted from the pandemic.

Conclusion

Conducted with an aim to reveal whether studying reading through translation was an effective strategy in improving comprehension skills in a teaching English as a foreign language context, the present study found that the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group on a comprehension test after practicing translation activities in reading classes taught over sixteen contact hours for 8 weeks. The primary strength of this study is that it investigated an area of teaching that has been overlooked and ignored for an extended period of time. Translation has long been declared persona non grata in many language teaching contexts, but the present study revealed the valuable role of translation in providing exposure to learners in foreign language learning settings where exposure to the target language is possible almost exclusively within the language classroom. In this regard, this study posits that by presenting a rich amount of input and giving learners an opportunity to convert it into output, translation can be a valuable tool in language learning provided that it is utilized meaningfully, purposefully, and in cooperation with other learning and teaching tools that aim to improve diverse domains of linguistic and conversational competence. In this sense, it is important that further research be carried out in various contexts to reveal the effect of translation on improving language skills, including reading. Considering the limitations in the present study, further research should look into how translation supports the language learning processes in different contexts and at various levels (preschool, K-12, higher education). It is also possible that studies adopting mixed methods designs can offer richer insights regarding the use of translation as a tool for language learning and teaching by integrating quantitative results of proficiency and competence tests with in-depts accounts of learning and teaching experiences of learners and teachers. Finally, further research that covers a wider sample group is needed to understand how translation contributes to the learning of students with diverse personal and professional backgrounds.

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