Developing Understanding Through EFL Students' Translation of Answers on Essay Tests

 Hamid Reza Mahboudi,[1]

[1]Department of Social Sciences, University College of Rubbi Rashid, Tabriz, Iran

ABSTRACT

Contrastive analysis course is a one-semester course now widely taught at the undergraduate level in Iran. EFL students have different types of goal orientations, but all teachers agree that student success depends on learning concepts rather than memorization of facts. Nevertheless, there is a problem with students' belief that success in CA relies on memorization. This popular fallacy causes students to take CA course with the wrong attitude. The sample composed of 30 translation students (6 males and 24 females) studying at the University College of Rub-bi Rashid, Tabriz, Iran. Two essay tests of contrastive analysis were administered. The first test included five limited essay questions along with the requested translations of answers. The second test included the same questions without a translation request and was administered two weeks later. The collected data was analyzed via analysis of paired sample t-test and SPSS 16.0 to compare students' scores in the two conditions. There was a significant difference in the scores of students on the first test (M=9.52, SD=3.095) and the second test (M=11.17, SD=3.029); t=-9.492, p = 0.000. Considering the significance level of the t-test, which is smaller than 0.05, we rejected the null hypothesis that there is no difference between the means. It was concluded that fear of translation request prevents students from mindlessly reciting course content, and thus, develops understanding and scores. The results of this study promise pedagogical implications for EFL practitioners, teachers as well as test developers..

Keywords: contrastive analysis; essay question; memorization; translation; understanding.

Corresponding Author: Hamidreza Mahboudi; Department of Social Sciences, University College of Rubbi Rashid, Tabriz, Iran

Phone: +989143009352
e-mail: hr_mahboodi@yahoo.com

1. Introduction

EFL students in Iran appears to have difficulty to appreciate the material in skill-based courses, then it seems necessary to help them promote their familiarity with translation techniques and theories and develop practical translation skills to the same standard as that expected of a university graduate. However, they just memorize and forget. They traditionally used to memorize in a parrot-fashion vocalizing words from the top of their heads and do just fine on the exams. They might not really learn the course content because they are accustomed to memorizing and forgetting.

Memorization is defined as learning an isolated fact through conscious effort, it is an access road, i.e., it provides access to learning. It's a diversion from the main route, a way of owning

without paying, of answering without understanding. Rote learning is often denigrated with the disparaging terms, such as parrot learning, regurgitation, cramming, or mugging, because it is sometimes regarded with suspicion and strongly discouraged by teachers. Likewise, Parker (1894) objected to rote learning, holding that there is no value in knowledge without understanding.

Nevertheless, memorization enjoys a lot of proponents (Battino, 1992; Bodner, 1986; Ausubel, Novak, & Hanesian, 1978). They maintained that memorization improves the brain and even sharpens deep understanding. Particularly, they disagree on the prohibition of rote learning and memorization as an interdiction, rather than as a healthy scientific nutrition. However, the learning of course content needs more than just memorizing book contents and teacher's notes to regurgitate on the exam. When faced with a question that needs their understanding, as in rendering their ideas into their first language, what they memorize does not help them find their way to a solution. Mayer (1987) defines learning as a steady change in a person's knowledge or behavior due to experience.

Unfortunately, this is a problem for many Iranian EFL students in many skill-based courses. It is believed that students are responsible for what they learn and how they learn. However; teachers being on the front line of education should facilitate that process in highly effective ways. If teachers develop tests to assess memory, students would undoubtedly decide to memorize materials. However, if teachers take responsibility and wish to become good models for their students, they would include types of items to encourage students not to memorize course content but to truly understand it.

2. Literature Review

Translation test is a means of assessing student understanding rather than student memory. That is, evaluation of the students' translations of their answers focuses on issues such as whether understanding of course content is captured in the translation. Therefore, the present study is a quest to discourage EFL students from mindlessly memorizing CA concepts. It sets out to explore the effects of translation of answers as a strategic technique to improve the Iranian EFL learners' understanding of CA concepts. In other words, this study seeks to examine whether EFL students" translation of their answers on limited essay-type tests of contrastive analysis would increase their understanding of CA course content. This study is of great importance, especially in Iranian EFL context, in contributing to the current literature on English teaching and learning research and CA teaching and testing.

Copious research in mathematics education indicates that teachers of this field seek to overemphasize understanding. The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics stated: More than ever, mathematics must include the mastery of concepts instead of mere memorization and the following of procedures. More than ever, school mathematics must include an understanding of how to use technology to arrive meaningfully at solutions to problems instead of endless attention to increasingly outdated computational tedium.

However, learning with understanding is not exclusive to mathematics. Many general theories of learning, including those with classic origins, deal with the notion of understanding. For instance, many recent theories of learning which stress on modeling internal representations (Gardner, 1985) and underscore the issue of understanding as a basic element of learning (Mayer, 1989; Ohlsson & Rees, 1988; Perkins & Simmons, 1988) attest to the fact that priority should be given to the issues of understanding in any model of learning (Grouws, 2006).

Moreover, cognitive psychology indicates that even with a good instruction, many students, no matter how talented, understand less than teachers imagine they do. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, students taking an examination are commonly able to identify what they have been told or what they have read; careful examination, however, often shows that their understanding is limited. Teachers should choose the most important concepts and skills to emphasize so that they can concentrate on the quality of understanding rather than on the quantity of information presented. There are much subjective arguments, but few empirical data that explore how students' understanding of course content can be promoted.

One such technique is to simply developing a few translation request questions to check students' understanding of what they have regurgitated on their test papers. By translating their English responses into their mother language, EFL students can construct their own meaning regardless of how clearly teachers or books tell them things. Through translation, mostly students do this by connecting new information and concepts to what he or she already believes without worrying about their linguistic proficiency. They can freely express themselves to prove how much of the course content they digest.

The translation method was mostly utilized in the nineteenth century before the arrival of the audio-lingual method. It helped many learners to master foreign languages. Moreover, translation methodology valued the culture of the people who had to learn a language. The only alleged disadvantage of this method was that it did not help learners put on a native accent. In the late seventies, with the arrival of the communicative method users greatly admired authenticity and native-like language competence. Translation was forbidden in the classrooms and many learners who preferred fluency were faced with two difficult options. First, they had to lose their cultural identity. Secondly, they were deprived of fluency and well-paid jobs.

Time has witnessed the merits of using translation in language learning, namely, the Military Intelligence Service Language School (MISLS) course on learning Japanese in improving the learning of Japanese language during the war. Using specific corpus list in a specific area, translation has also been discovered to speed up language learning. Nevertheless, there has been extensive dispute over the success of translation method especially when it denies the practice of target language immersion in second language acquisition (Cook 2010).

Today, many EFL learners have come to realize the significance of translation. Translation can help improve foreign language teaching and learning (Leonardi, 2010). Leonardi (2010) argues that, "Significant signs of a new revival of translation in language teaching have become visible, as shown by recent literature on applied linguistics" (p.17). Moreover; there are "significant and visible signs of a revival of translation in language teaching according to recent literature and applied linguistics" (Malmkjaer, 1998, p.1).

However, Dagilienė (2012) holds that everyone has their own view of translation. Linguists, methodologists, and educators see translation differently. There has been considerable debate over the use of translation in foreign language teaching. Translation was regarded as useless, untrustworthy and extraneous. As a result, limitations were set up on the use of translation in language learning.

Malmkjaer (1998) introduces the motives which were united against translation: it is only appropriate for training translators; it is a bad test of language skills; it produces interference; it misleads and prevents students from thinking in the foreign language; and finally, translation is unnatural. Duff (1994) sums up other reasons why teachers banned the use of translation in foreign language classes. Duff (1994) highlights that translation is text-specific and limited only to two skills of reading and writing. It is not a communicative activity since it doesn't encourage oral interaction.

On the other hand, Schaffner (1998) speaks in favor of translation and believes that it is advantageous to foreign language learning. Schaffner (1998) posits the following benefits for translation: it improves verbal agility, expands students' vocabulary in L2, develops style, improves learner's understanding of how languages work, consolidates L2 structures for active use, and facilitates the comprehension of L2.

Dagilienė (2012) argues that we are witnessing pedagogical translation in foreign language classes nowadays, which makes translation as a useful tool in the hands of teachers and learners. Pedagogical translation is believed to strengthen learner's competences. Through translation, students practice reading, writing, vocabulary, grammar, and speaking. It also encourages learners to communicate in the target language. Furthermore, in the opinion of Ross (2000), translation is known as the fifth skill and an essential communication skill since it develops interaction and understanding. As a very useful tool in foreign language teaching, translation comprises interaction and cooperation between people, which makes it instrumental in the learning and teaching

process. Therefore, the use of native language in the teaching situation as an aid prevents learner's mental impasse. Perkins (1985) clearly supports this theory when he says:

In order to develop in the students a linguistic awareness of contrast between L1 and L2 grammatical structures, and thus counteract interlingual interference, the teacher can quite legitimately get students to translate L1 sentences designed to pinpoint and clarify structures and patterns the student still has not assimilated. (p.90)

On balance, Duff (1994) is correct when he observed that translation does not happen in a vacuum. While it operates everywhere and all the time, the students practice translation when they read signs and notices, instructions, and letters for others. In addition, under the influence of mother tongue translation becomes a good tool to adopt a metalinguistic attitude towards a foreign language.

It appears that text analysis and translation are part of every successful methodology. Leonardi (2009) argues that "a text should be read carefully and analyzed in detail to determine the contents in terms of what, how and why it is said" (p.143) before it is translated. Text analysis develops comprehension and expands vocabulary. The mental reprocessing can also improve students' writing skills because it is a shortcut to comprehension and production. Leonardi (2010, as cited in Dagilienė, 2012) maintains that a good translation should run naturally, reproduce both the style and the context of the original text, and simulate target language rules. Since translation is considered a communicative activity, it encourages communication between the teacher and the student. Lending a note of credibility to his argument, Leonardi (2009) insists that, "learners are encouraged to discuss rights and wrongs as well as problems related to the translation task" (p.145).

This study aimed to investigate whether asking CA students for translation of their answers on limited essay-type tests would increase their understanding of CA concepts. The following hypothesis was formulated:

H0: Asking the students to translate their answers on limited essay-type tests does not increase their understanding of CA concepts throughout the course.

3.Method

3.1. Participants

The participants comprising the sample of this study were 30 EFL undergraduate students of contrastive analysis majoring in English translation (6 males and 24 females) studying at the University College of Rub-bi Rashid, Tabriz, Iran. Nearly all the participants had a Turkish background and spoke Persian (Farsi) as a second language.

3.2. Instruments

Homogeneity test

For any research to be valid, it is essential to guarantee the participants' homogeneity. A placement test (TOEFL Junior, 2012; Appendix A) was administered to ascertain that the participants were at the same level and there was no significant difference between students. The test was an objective one, containing 84 multiple choice questions to identify the optimal level for students entering the language program. Besides, all the students participating in the study had passed all the necessary prerequisite courses based on college standards.

Contrastive analysis tests

These tests included five limited essay-type questions based on the content of a CA course. Two essay tests of contrastive analysis were administered.

3.3 Procedure

The first test included five limited essay questions along with the requested translations of

answers into Persian. The second test included the same questions without a translation request and was administered two weeks later. Using an analytic scoring approach, students' scores of their first test were correlated with their scores of their second test. Analytic scoring involves reading the limited response essays for the essential parts of an ideal answer. In this case, the teacher needs to make a list of the important elements that students should include in an answer. The examiner grades the essays based on how well students' answers reflect the components of the model answer. (Reiner, Bothell, Sudweeks, & Wood, 2002).

4.Results

Description of scores with translation and no translation are presented in Table 1. Scores were calculated from 20 and descriptive indexes were calculated for the variables with translation and without translation. The average of non-translate scores was 11.17, the lowest was 7.50 and the highest was 20. The average of translate scores was 9.52, the lowest is 5 and the highest is 18.13.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of tests (score=20)

Tests	N	M	Median	SD	Skew-ness	Kurtosis	Min	Max
Test with translation	30	9.52	10.00	3.10	0.70	0.69	5.00	18.13
Test without translation	30	11.17	10.31	3.03	0.98	1.08	7.50	20.00

The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was used to examine the normal distribution of variables (see Table 2). The null hypothesis in this test is the normal distribution of the variable. If the significance level of the test is greater than 0.05, then the null hypothesis is confirmed and we conclude that the distribution of the desired variable is normal.

Considering the significant levels obtained, it is concluded that all variables have a normal distribution (the significant level is greater than 0)

Table 2. The result of One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test

	N	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	p-value
Test with translation (score=8)	30	.941	.339
Test without translation (score=8)	30	.821	.510
Test with translation (score=20)	30	.941	.339
Test without translation (score=20)	30	.821	.510
Test with translation (score=100)	30	.941	.339
Test without translation (score=100)	30	.821	.510

As it is demonstrated in the following figures (Figure 1, 2, and 3), the distribution of data is close to normal, and it seems that there is an outlier.

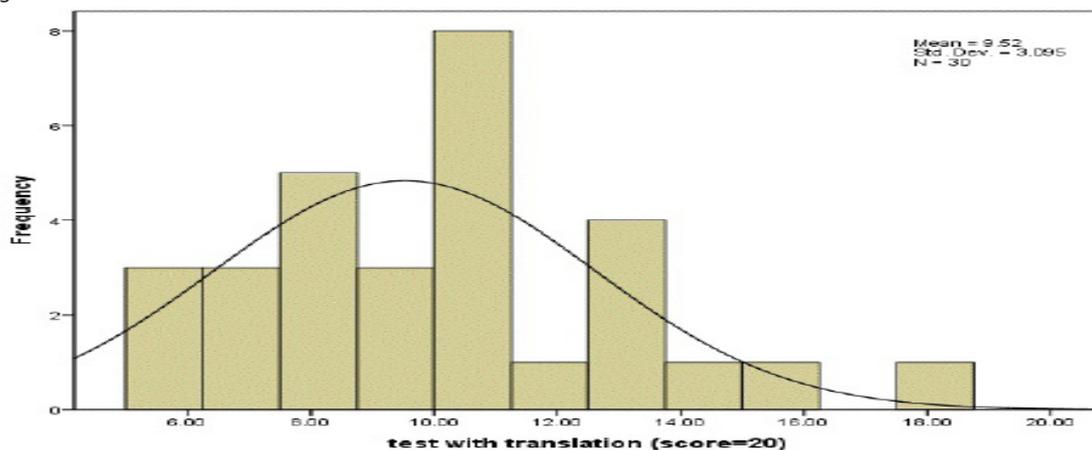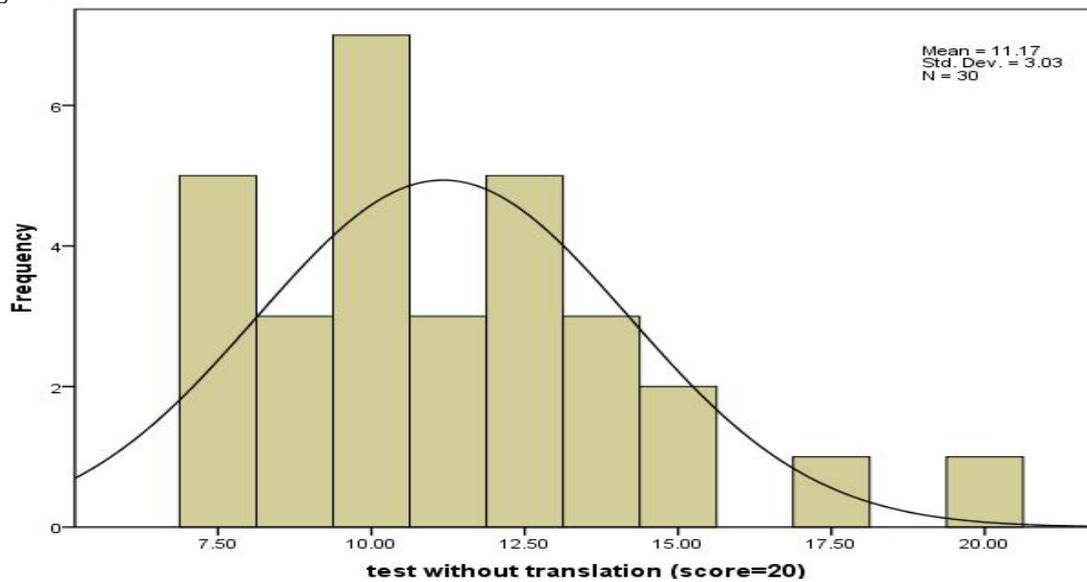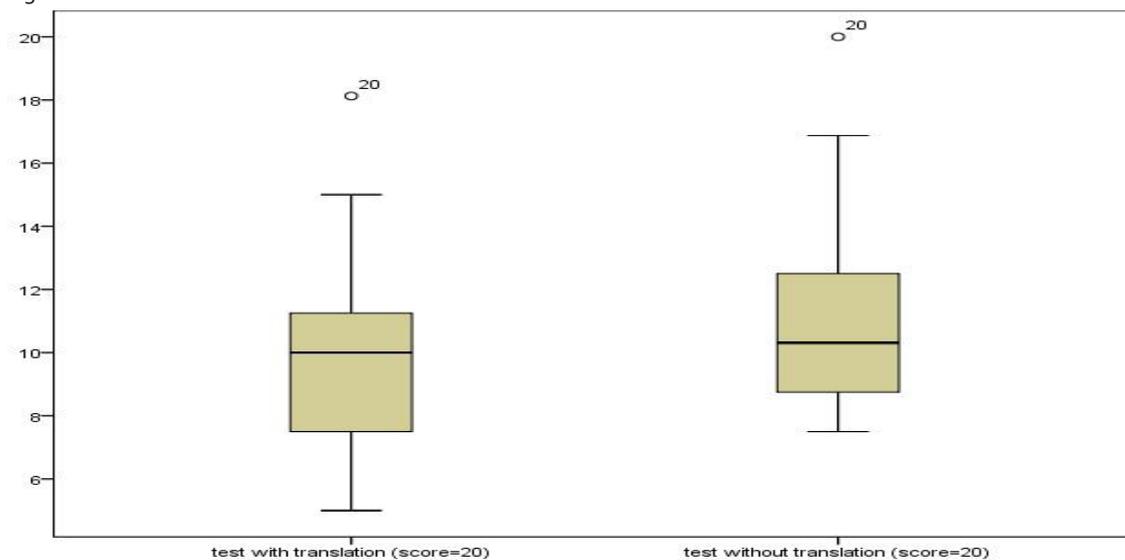Figure 1. Scores with translation and no translation

Figure 2. Scores without translation

Likewise, as it is shown in the boxplot, there are outliers in both translate and non-translate scores which is more than the other scores. This score belongs to student no. 20.

Figure 3. Scores with and without translation

Since scores of both tests relate to one group, a paired sample t-test was used to compare the scores. The null hypothesis is the equivalence of the mean scores in the test with translation and the test without translation. If the test level is less than 0.05, the null hypothesis will be rejected.

The mean scores in the test with translation and the test without translation are 9.52 and 11.11 respectively (Sig.= 0.001). Considering the significance level of the t-test, which is smaller than 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected. As a result, the scores in the non-translation test is significantly greater than those in the translation test (see Table 4).

Table 4: The result of Paired Samples t-test for the comparison of test scores of tests with translation and without translation (score=20)

Variable	Group	N	M	SD	t	df	Sig.
Test score (score=20)	with transla-tion	30	9.5208	3.09548	-9.492	29	.000
	without trans-lation	30	11.1667	3.02973			

5.Discussion and Conclusion

As Wiggins and McTighe (2006) asserted, teaching for understanding means making students truly understand something and be able to use it and carry it to new contexts, then helping students to think deeply about the underlying concepts. Likewise, Immordino-Yang, (2016) argued, getting students to feel as well as think helps them understand concepts better.

Translation is a means to this end. From Stoitchkov's (2006) perspective, translation engages learners in a metalinguistic task, which necessitates attention to the syntactic features of language. Likewise, it makes no difference if it is a foreign and a second language, translation fosters learner awareness to how a concept is rendered in L1 and L2. As   Stoitchkov stated, "It is assumed that an ability (which is also a skill) to look at the stream of speech "with the mind's eye" is crucial to language learning" (p. 1).

It is common belief that in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context the use of translation is controversial, some authors such as Duff (1989/1996), Deller and Rinvolucri. (2017)   , Prodomou (2000), Bowen (2013), and Atkinson (1987) have supported its use in the language classroom insisting that translation activities may contribute to the practice and skills students need to interact in an accurate, meaningful and appropriate way. Results of this study are consistent with the findings of authors who argue that for translation activities to have positive results, it is important that we discuss them from a poststructuralist view and employ translation in the EFL classroom as a learning strategy.

The result of Paired Samples t-test demonstrated that the mean of the scores on the second test was significantly greater than the mean of the students' scores on the first test. In the present study, students were not informed that they were going to take a test of CA with a request for translation of their answers. After this surprise, knowing that they would take the same test after two weeks, they felt they had no choice but to develop their understanding of the concepts.

EFL teachers should try different strategies to represent text in ways that render it meaningful for the majority of the students. Consequently, asking CA students for translation of their answers on a limited essay-type test increased their understanding of CA concepts and thus their performance level on the second test. While memorization of concepts gets in the way of learning, understanding of those concepts facilitates learning.

As it was disclosed through translations of their answers, the students who had memorized the contents were caught red handed on the first test, and they were found to have not understood the CA concepts. On the contrary, the students raised their scores on the second test by understanding and translating their answers correctly.

The material presented in this course provides an overview of CA, CA hypothesis and its psychological and linguistic bases, pedagogical values of CA, and different versions of CA. At present, as EFL teachers we have to question what is more important for our students, container or content. No doubt, we all expect our students to graduate academically and become forerunners of change in nontraditional education.

This study showed that EFL teachers can discourage students from mindlessly reciting information through the occasional addition and use of translation questions which influence EFL students to promote learning with understanding of CA concepts. If it is necessary for students to understand course content, then have them often translate their answers on limited essay

questions. It will prevent students from taking the load off and memorizing the book contents throughout the course. Similarly, it will make the process of learning CA concepts more effective because subsequent understanding and recall of those concepts on tests and exams drive them to generalize similar experience to other courses.

However, as with all empirical research, the present study has some limitations and provides suggestions for further research to be undertaken in the future. The first is that the number of subjects obtained in the study was small. A bigger scale study needs to be conducted for more reliable results, and with the inclusion of more academic EFL courses.

Second, we should be cautious about the generalizability of the findings of the current study. In this study we chose a contrastive analysis course among the students' translation courses because it is the type of text that all students required to deal with. However, it only represents one type of text read in academic courses. In this sense, future research is needed using other texts and genres, as well as more test items.

A third limitation has to do with the participants' level of proficiency in English. In order to have an adequate number of participants for the study, and to avoid gender effect on reading, we randomly selected mid proficiency participants because this was the proficiency level and the gender that allowed us to obtain the biggest the biggest sample of population. It should be interesting to explore whether a study with participants at different and with different genders, that is, either male participants or female participants would reveal different findings.

A fourth and final limitation concerns the fact that many participants in the study indicated that they had a Turkish background and found it difficult to provide Persian equivalents for their answers. For this reason, we wonder whether research with participants who are of different linguistic backgrounds would have provided us with different results.

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