The Relationship between English Language Proficiency and EFL Learners' Use of Translation Strategies

Sheng Tan

Department of English Language and Literature, School of Foreign Languages, Southwest Jiaotong University, Chengdu, China

Email address:

tansheng323@hotmail.com (Sheng Tan)

Abstract: EFL(English as a Foreign Language) learners tend to choose translation strategies in their English learning process. This study aims to examine the potential relationship between English language proficiency and EFL learners' use of translation strategies, displaying the differences in the use of translation strategies between students at higher level of English language proficiency and those at lower level of English language proficiency. An ITLS questionnaire (The Inventory for Translation as a Learning Strategy) designed by Liao Posen (Liao, 2002：159-161)was distributed to 190 students in Southwest Jiaotong University who had taken the national English language proficiency assessment—CET-4(College English Test Band 4). Based on Independent Sample T-test, the results show that significant differences were found between the proficient EFL learners and the limited English proficient learners in some of the uses of translation strategies, and lower achievers were more likely to adopt translation strategies in English learning. According to Pearson Correlation Analysis and Multiple Regression Analysis, this research also found out that the use of translation to enhance English-language abilities was negatively correlated with English language proficiency and could best predict the negative performance of English language proficiency assessment. Implications for the role of translation strategies in EFL learning are discussed.

Keywords: English Language Proficiency, Learning Strategies, Translation Strategies, English Learning, EFL Learners

1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Research

Translation as an EFL learning strategy is quite common among EFL learners to acquire English. It takes advantage of learners' previous knowledge of their first language (L1), enabling students to learn English more quickly.

However, it remains a controversial issue whether the use of translation should be encouraged. A lot of learners have been discouraged from using their native language in EFL classes since many EFL educators assert that translating English into first language or vice versa is actually a process of interference in learning English, making students hard to think, speak and write in English.

Nonetheless, forbidding or discouraging students from using translation strategies is not actually a wise option. Research reveals L1 use to be a naturally occurring phenomenon in the L2 classroom at the levels of external, private, and inner speech (Moore, 2013：243). Students would feel unable to produce English utterances, whether written or colloquial, if they were discouraged from resorting to their mother tongue to help learn English.

Until now, empirical studies have failed to reach an agreement over whether L1 use in EFL learning is beneficial for improving English language proficiency. Therefore, it still remains to be explored how frequently translation strategies are used by learners with different English language abilities and how these differences affect learners' English language proficiency.

1.2. Objectives of the Research

To investigate the frequencies of using translation strategies by students at different levels of English language proficiency;

To find out how these strategies are correlated with English language proficiency

1.3. Research Questions

The research questions are:

a. What are the differences in the use of translation

strategies between students at higher level of English language proficiency and those at lower level?

b. What are the relationship between the use of translation strategies and achievements on the CET-4 exam?

c. Can the use of translation strategies predict CET-4 scores?

1.4. Significance of the Study

Chinese is often used by Chinese EFL students so as to comprehend, memorize and produce English (Liao, 2002：14). Especially limited English proficient students are more likely to turn to their first language for help to finish a task requiring using English (Garner, 1990). However, whether the use of translation affects English learning positively is still to be surveyed. Therefore, through a quantitative analysis of data from questionnaires, this study attempts to explore how Chinese university students use translation to learn English and how translation strategies affect their English language abilities. The results will enable EFL teachers to reconsider the status of translation strategy in English teaching, that is, whether it is necessary to advocate it or abandon it. Moreover, EFL learners will be made aware of the influence of translation strategy on their English language proficiency.

2. Literature Review

Translating is a process by which expressions are converted from the target language to the native language or from the native language to the target language(Oxford,1990).As a learning strategy, translation strategy refers to using the first language as a base for understanding and/or producing the second language(Chamot,1987). The use of translation is very common, playing an important role in EFL learning, ranging from vocabulary, reading to writing. EFL learners use translation as a learning strategy to facilitate their English learning(Liao,2002：1).In many learners' eyes, their English learning could be dramatically encouraged with the help of translation(Karimian&Talebinejad,2013：605). Corder(1981) also emphasizes that students' native language is useful to compensate their deficiencies in second language learning.

In terms of English teaching, Grammar-Translation Method is in favor of the use of translation. It is a teaching method that detailed analysis of grammatical rules is prior to translating sentences or texts into and out of the target language (Richards, J.C & Rodgers, T, 1986). However, this method becomes much less popular than before since it does not consider language as it is used in daily situations (Liao, 2002：20).

Therefore, translation as a learning strategy fails to be advocated by a large number of EFL educators. Despite its positive influence on EFL learners, it has been completely neglected or omitted in EFL classrooms since a view held by many teachers is popular that L1 translation interferes with the acquisition of L2(Liao, 2006：192). Many of them attach great importance to daily application of English, especially spoken English. Such teaching methods as Direct Method, Audio-lingual Method, Silent Way, Natural Approach, Total

Physical response and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)do not focus on translation(Liang, 2010：6-7). Especially in CLT, EFL learners' mother tongue should be discouraged since students are required to think in the target language in order to improve the proficiency of the target language (Liao, 2006：192).

Less emphasis on learners' native language has caused problems. According to Swan (1985a＆1985b), CLT method does not consider the role of world language and mother tongue, resulting in EFL learners' great pressure in producing L2 due to their limited language proficiency. Moreover, little empirical evidence has proven the assumption that using only the target language can avoid the interference from L1 (Liao, 2006：193).

Scholars have reconsidered the positive effects of translation in language learning. Fusing translation into current teaching techniques is a choice favored by many teachers now. EFL educators are supposed to be tolerant of the use of mother tongue in order to enable learners to produce English utterances more easily. For instance, in EFL writing classes, in order for more ideas, students can be allowed to think and speak in their native language when discussing with their classmates (Liu, 2002：65).

In fact, some researchers have conducted empirical studies to investigate the role of EFL learners' first language in EFL writing, but the results were not the same. Lay(1982) analyzed composing processes and compositions of 4 Chinese EFL students, finding out that applying L1 benefits content, organization and details in L2 writing. Moreover, according to Friedlander (1991), adopting first language in L2 writing enables students to organize compositions with reference to their native culture. By contrast, some studies show the opposite results. The research carried out by Kobayashi and Rinnert (1992) compared EFL writings helped by translation strategy with those which adopted little first language accompanied by the result that students at lower level of English language proficiency depended more upon translation. Nevertheless, the linguistic errors in direct English compositions were significantly fewer than those in compositions written by learners who relied much on translation. Wen & Guo (1998) conducted a study on Chinese high school students' English picture compositions, attempting to explore the relationship between thinking in native language and EFL writing ability. The results reveal that high achievers used mother tongue less than normal when writing in English, whereas low achievers showed more reliance on native language in EFL writing. However, this study investigated only 6 students, thereby the findings remaining to be tested. All the investigations above fail to include enough students (more than 30), which is essential for statistical significance.

According to Wen &Wang (1996), the statistical results show that the use of mother tongue is significantly negatively correlated with CET-4 scores. In order to find out what translation strategies were used by Taiwanese EFL learners, Liao(2002) designed questionnaires for his PhD dissertation, reporting that a diversity of translation strategies are used by

different majors. Among them, foreign language majors and more proficient learners are less likely to use translation in EFL learning.

Cao (2008) adopted Pearson Correlation Analysis to examine the correlations between Urumqi's English majors' use of translation strategy and their achievements on TEM-4(Test for English Majors-Band 4),indicating that the frequencies of the utilization of translation strategies are negatively correlated with achievements on TEM-4.

Existing studies bear important findings, but there still exist some limitations. Firstly, they were based upon limited population of students, which might be not applicable to other learner groups with different educational settings (Liao,2002：211). Secondly, there have already been many studies investigating the differences of learning strategies between good learners and poor learners (Ellis, 1994; Park, 1997; Griffiths, 2003; Wen & Wang, 2004:4; Dong, 2009:111; Murray, 2010; Tan& Zhang, 2015：62), but little has been done to explore the distinction of the use of translation strategy among learners of different language abilities. Thirdly, in terms of the application of translation strategies, more research attention seems to have been devoted to language teaching from the educators' view. Fourthly, the results of the surveys on the effects of applying translation vary greatly among different researchers. Therefore, a new research needs to be conducted.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Though 190 questionnaires were sent to students for response, only 168 were valid for this study. Among the invalid ones, 7 subjects failed to respond to several question items. The other 15 ones did not provide their CET-4 scores since they did not attend the exam.

Then, 168 valid subjects were divided into different groups according to their scores of CET-4. Learners whose scores ranked in the top 27% constituted the higher achievers (45 students), whereas learners whose scores ranked in the bottom 27% made up the lower achievers (45 students) (Wu, 2000).

3.2. Instruments

The instruments in this study include a questionnaire about strategy use measurement, the Inventory for Translation as a Learning Strategy (ITLS), designed by Liao(2002). According to the factor analysis made by Liao, strategy measurement can be divided into five composite strategy variables namely: S1: Strategies about using translation as learning strategies to enhance specific language skills; S2: Strategies about using translation as learning strategies to acquire English forms or structures; S3: Strategies involve the avoidance of using native language in using English, through translation consciously practicing English, clarifying the similarities and differences between Chinese and English;S4: Strategies involve using translation as a social learning strategy; and S5: Strategies about using translation-related materials. The

answers to the ITLS are on a Likert scale of 1 to 5 too, indicating the frequency to which they use the strategies about translation.

Participants' English proficiency was differentiated according to their CET-4 achievements. The CET-4 examination, selected by Chinese Ministry of Education(CME), is a standardized English level test for undergraduate students in mainland China, objectively examining students' comprehensive English-language ability through assessment of listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating (Committee of CET-4 Syllabus for College English Test,2006).

Software SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) version 21.0 was used to analyze the gathering data in this study.

4. Results& Discussion

4.1. Differences in Achievements on the CET-4 Exam between the Two Groups

Table 1: Achievements in the CET-4 Exam between the Two Groups.

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value
higher	45	570.87	26.07	21.58*
lower	45	424.07	37.45	

* = P<.05

As is displayed in the table above, there is a significant difference between the lower achievers and higher achievers in the scores of CET-4(t=21.58,p<0.05). The mean score of the CET-4 exam for learners at higher level of English proficiency was 570.87, while the mean score of the CET-4 exam for learners at lower level of English proficiency was 424.07.

4.2. Classification of ITLS Questionnaire Items

Liao Posen (2002：89-94) made a factor analysis, reducing the ITLS variables into five composite variables as follows:

Table 2: Variables of ITLS Questionnaire.

variable	description
S1	Strategies to enhance English skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking.
S2	Strategies to learn English forms or structures in areas such as vocabulary, idioms, phrases, and grammar.
S3	Strategies to avoid the use of Chinese when using English, to practice translating, and to clarify the differences and similarities between Chinese and English.
S4	Strategies to interact with other people in learning.
S5	Strategies to use learning aids such as dictionaries and to take notes.

4.3. Differences in Use of Translation Strategies between the Two Groups

Table 3: Results of Independent Sample T-test.

Strategies	Group 1 (higher level)		Group 2 (lower level)		
	M	SD	M	SD	F
S1	2.87	0.64	3.26	0.66	0.085*
S2	3.33	0.81	3.44	0.88	0.361

Strategies	Group 1 (higher level)		Group 2 (lower level)		
S3	2.89	0.52	3.10	0.47	0.032*
S4	2.19	0.78	2.50	0.65	0.212*
S5	3.14	0.56	3.13	0.76	0.062

*=P<.05

Table 3 shows the mean scores of the two groups on different translation strategies. By comparing the differences in the use of translation strategies between students who scored high in the CET-4 exam and those who scored low in this exam, the results of Independent Sample T-test show that there are statistically significant differences in S1, S3 and S4,but the differences in the use of S2 and S5 did not get to the significance level. Except S5 which emphasizes the use of learning aids, the group achieving a higher level of English proficiency obtained a lower mean score on all other strategies than the group achieving a lower level of English proficiency.

The significant difference in the use of S1 indicates that learners at different levels of English language proficiency show different tendencies to turn to their mother tongue for help to improve their comprehensive English-language abilities, i.e. listening, speaking, writing and reading. According to Oxford's classification (1990), the means stand for the frequency of strategy use.1.5-2.4 means "seldom use this strategy". 2.5-3.4 means "use this strategy sometimes". 3.5-4 means "use this strategy frequently". In all the items of S1,the mean in the group of students who obtained higher scores in CET-4 exam reached less than 3.5(with the highest mean 3.22),whereas the mean scores in the other group reached over 3.5.This implies that higher achievers are more likely to avoid using Chinese when speaking, writing, reading and listening in English than low achievers because they hope to think first in English.

In terms of S3,what is worth noticing is the fact that for the items emphasizing thinking first in English rather than in Chinese, students at lower level of English proficiency scored lower in these items, revealing that they are less likely to get rid of using Chinese when learning English.

Low achievers show significantly more tendencies to use translation as a social learning strategy to improve English-language abilities. For example, they will ask others to translate English into Chinese when failing to understand something in English.

The significant differences in S1, S3 and S4 highlight the fact that Chinese EFL learners at higher level of English proficiency would endeavor to avoid the interference of Chinese. For low achievers, thinking like an English native speaker challenges them since the unfamiliarity with non-native language burdens them with lots of pressure to make English utterances.

4.4. Relations between Translation Strategy and Achievements on the CET-4

In this research, Pearson correlation analysis was employed to explore the relationship between translation strategy and scores of CET-4.

Table 4: Results of Pearson Correlation Analysis.

		S1	S2	S3	S4	S5
CET-4 scores	Pearson Correlation	-.270*	-.036	-.207	-.194	-.007
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.010	.734	.050	.067	.946
	N	90	90	90	90	90

Table 4 presents the correlation between translation strategies and CET-4 scores.S1, S2, S3, S4 and S5 are all negatively related to achievements on the CET-4 exam, but only S1 shows significantly negative correlation with CET-4 scores. Unlike previous studies made by Cao(2008),whose research found out that all the translation strategies were significantly negatively correlated with achievements on TEM-4(Test for English Major Band 4), the present study displayed that although all the translation strategies showed negative correlations with CET-4 scores, they did not have statistical significance except S1.

Table 5: Predictors of EFL Learners' English Proficiency.

Model	Beta	t	Sig.
S1	-.405	-3.093	.003
S2	.178	1.447	.152
S3	-.165	-1.608	.111
S4	-.178	-1.718	.090
S5	.194	1.584	.117

Multiple Regression Analysis was employed to examine which variables could predict students' performance in the CET-4 exam among 5 different translation strategies. It is revealed in table 5 that S1 turned out to be the only significant strategy that could predict students' negative performance in the CET-4 exam. ANOVA proved the validity of this analysis (F＝3.439, p＝.007 < .01). This means that students who used more S1 would most probably score low in CET-4 as well. This result is consistent with Cao (2008) whose research found out that S1 could negatively predict students' achievements on English test.

Although S3 and S4 were the negative predictors of the achievements on the CET-4 exam, failing to resonate with Cao's findings, they did not show statistically significant differences. Furthermore, as shown in table 5, only S1 could be the statistically significant negative predictor of CET-4 achievements. However, undoubtedly, achieving higher level of English proficiency requires students to gradually rid themselves of reliance on their first language. Chinese Students at higher level of English language proficiency rely little on Chinese.

This is consistent with previous empirical findings. Wen & Guo (1993) discovered that Chinese students with higher scores on composition used L1 far less than the students with lower scores. Huang and Tzeng (2000) noted that Taiwanese high proficient English learners mostly use the target language in their language learning process. The results show contradiction with the findings of Liao(2002)who claimed that students mostly used their mother tongue to expand their English knowledge of vocabulary, structures, expressions and

to enhance skills of reading, writing, and speaking.

Given the lack of statistically significant relations between CET-4 performance and most of the translation strategies, it stands to reason that although the use of translation strategies may exert negative influence on students' improvement of comprehensive English skills, the positive role of translation strategies in EFL learning should not be neglected. For items in S5, high achievers scored higher than low achievers, revealing that it is possible for learners to use their mother tongue to help distinguish foreign language from their first language.

5. Conclusion

This study addresses 3 major research questions based upon Independent Sample T-test, Pearson Correlation and multiple regression analysis.

The results of Independent Sample T-test show that there exist significant differences in the use of S1,S3 and S4 between higher English proficient students and lower ones. Lower English proficient learners use significantly more first language to help acquire English, revealing the fact that students at higher level of English proficiency require themselves thinking directly in English and avoiding using Chinese first.

S1 means translation as a learning strategy to enhance specific language skills such as English reading, writing and speaking. It was significantly negatively correlated with English proficiency and could be the only significant negative predictor of CET-4 performance, indicating that the more S1 strategies were used, the lower level of English proficiency would be achieved by EFL learners. Therefore, the analysis provides implications for EFL learners that employing strategies of translation is not always a supporting factor in language learning process. The experience of higher English proficient learners suggests that the avoidance of first language to a great extent allows students to transfer their thought pattern, to explore cultural differences through language and then to acquire a new foreign language without interference of mother tongue. High level learners do not make more gains than lower counterparts by using translation strategies (Husain, 1995). A solid foundation of English language enables advanced learners to adopt less L1.

Nonetheless, it is arbitrary to completely deny the positive effects of employing mother tongue to learn English. Both high English proficient and low proficient learners often refer back to their native language at the beginning of EFL learning process to diminish anxiety to produce a foreign language and boost learning efficiency (Liao, 2002).Especially for low proficiency learners, they benefit a lot from comparing their native language with English and gain a better insight of English vocabularies, phrases, sentences and contexts. Advanced learners also resort to translation strategies sometimes, enabling themselves to gain insights into differences between L1 and L2 and this ultimately improve L2 competence (Perkins,1985).

Therefore, translation strategies should not be totally banned since it is helpful for most of new EFL learners or those whose English language proficiency fails to attain a high level. However, when learners gradually reach an intermediate level of English language proficiency, they should be encouraged to think directly in English so as to improve their comprehensive English-language abilities and become more native-like learners.

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