REVISITING TRANSLATION AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING TOOL: CONTRASTING BELIEFS OF DIVERSELY PROFICIENT STUDENTS

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Abstract

Translation as a learning tool or strategy, which is also known as pedagogical translation, has reemerged as a topic of discussion after being overshadowed by the popularity of the communicative approach. While a number of experts and scholars perceive translation or the use of L1 as interference, several others believe that translation does not really disappear from foreign language learning practices. As many research findings showed beneficial impacts of using translation activities to enhance foreign language learning, other research looked into learners' perception of the use of pedagogical translation. An interesting contradiction was found stating that diversely proficient students had different perceptions of the usefulness of translation activities as a learning tool (Calis & Dikilitas, 2012; Dagiliene, 2012). Therefore, this research attempted to investigate learners' beliefs on translation practices as a learning tool in their foreign language classroom respective to their proficiency levels. University students of non-English major were involved in this research. Questionnaire and interview were employed to gather relevant data. The findings reveal how translation as a learning strategy was perceived by learners with different ranges of proficiency levels.

Keywords: foreign language learning, pedagogical translation, proficiency, students' beliefs, translation

INTRODUCTION

As a pedagogical tool or strategy, the definition of translation is quite different from that in the field of translation studies. Translation which was formerly known as merely a way of conveying meaning in one language by finding the equivalence in another has shifted in terms of its definition when it is involved in second or foreign language learning contexts. The definition of translation therefore has extended its scope.

In spite of being rejected in many contexts and by a number of teachers and practitioners, translation remains undeniably existing in English as a foreign language (EFL) context. Evidence has been collected to prove that translation is still widely used in EFL learning context and beneficial to the learning process (Calis & Dikilitas, 2012; Lee, 2013; Pekkanli, 2012).

In terms of the development of teaching methodology in EFL instruction, translation has its ups and downs. Cumpenasu (2007) briefly described how translation was highly praised in the grammar translation method, was underestimated during the flourish of direct and audio-lingual methods, reappeared with the rise of cognitive approach, and was frequently excluded in the communicative approach. Although eventually communicative approach is quite flexible with translation, the approach does not really favor it being applied in language classrooms.

The fact that translation has never really disappeared from language classroom practices leads some research to investigate the beliefs of both teachers and students on this topic. Among the findings, there is a dispute between studies conducted by Dagiliene (2012) and Calis and Dikilitas (2012). Dagiliene (2012) found that low proficient students perceived translation to be not useful for them. On the other hand, highly proficient learners participating in a study conducted by Calis and Dikilitas (2012) shared the same perception that the use of L1 in translation was less preferable. Meanwhile in Indonesia, Nursanti (2016) found that students showed positive attitude toward bilingual instructions or the use of both L1 and L2 in the classroom.

The contradiction showed in Dagiliene (2012) and Calis and Dikilitas (2012) as well as limited information regarding this topic encourage the researcher to explore more on the beliefs of students with different proficiency levels toward the use of translation in EFL learning. This study aims to answer the following question: how do students of different proficiency levels perceive the use of translation as an EFL learning strategy?

The research findings contrast the beliefs of students with high and low levels of proficiency toward translation practices in an EFL classroom. As for the implication, the findings of this research are expected to provide insights and considerations for teachers if they wish to include translation activities in their teaching with regard to learners' different proficiency levels.

This research took place in an EFL setting where English is not widely used or spoken outside the classroom. As a multilingual country, almost each region in Indonesia has its own local language and Indonesian (*Bahasa Indonesia*) is the lingua franca used by the citizens. For this reason, EFL learning in Indonesia cannot be separated from the multilingual nature of its learners.

In such a multilingual context, EFL teachers are sometimes trapped in a dilemma of whether or not to use learners' first language in the classroom. Harmer (2007b) addressed this topic in his book by briefly explaining how students' L1 might either positively or negatively affect foreign language learning. The use of L1 was perceived to be useful for gaining more responses from students of lower proficiency levels, acting as a learning tool to compare L1 and English, and maintaining social atmosphere in the classroom. The use of L1, however, was also reported to pose some disadvantages. Firstly, teachers will not find it particularly useful when they do not share the same L1 as the learners. Secondly, it restricts students' use of English. Thirdly, it might become counter-productive when teachers want to give contexts and opportunities for students to practice and use the target language since L1 can be a sort of barrier.

As stated earlier, the definition of translation in translation studies and translation as a pedagogical tool is different. This research addresses translation in the latter sense. Therefore, the definition of translation in this research is going to be narrowed down to the context of translation as a pedagogical tool. Translation in this case still possesses the characteristic of enabling communication by interpreting meanings of one language by finding the equivalence in another language (Al-Musawi, 2014). However, when real translation highlights the end-product, pedagogical translation treats translation as a means of learning (Aguado & Solis-Becerra, 2013; Vermes, 2010). Pedagogical translation is capable of providing information related to students' proficiency. Translation in this context covers the use of L1 by teachers and students during learning in both observable or mental state and translation activities of interpreting language inputs from L1 to L2 or vice versa.

A brief summary of why translation may either supports or goes against language learning has been presented by Fernández-Guerra (2014). Translation seems to be not preferable as it is

artificial, not communicative, impractical, ineffective, and can work well only to some students. Moreover, translation does not support effective foreign language learning to happen as it is bounded to only literacy skills and shows less appreciation toward the target language. Whereas on the other side, counterarguments toward the previously mentioned claims are presented, arguing that translation can be communicative and be modified to enable all language skills to be covered.

The use of translation in pedagogical contexts has long been addressed and debated. It can be clearly seen from the development of teaching methods within foreign language learning contexts. A concise review written by Cumpenasu (2007) portrayed how translation was widely employed in the era of grammar translation method, highly neglected in the era of direct and audio-lingual methods, flourished again when cognitive approach was popular, and firstly considered irrelevant in communicative approach which then became more inclusive toward the use of translation within pedagogical contexts.

Not only can the debate be seen from the development of teaching methods, but it can also be seen in the findings of previous studies. Pekkanli (2012) and Asgarian (2012) identified that teachers were on two different ends toward the perception of the use of translation in EFL learning contexts. Some teachers really appreciated the usefulness of translation while, on the other extreme, the rest of them did not think that the use of L1 could benefit students. In other research on students' views, it was discovered that they did not share the same opinion regarding the use of translation in classroom contexts (Al-Musawi, 2014; Calis and Dikilitas, 2012; Dagiliene, 2012). In the research conducted by Calis and Dikilitas (2012) and Al-Musawi (2014), it was discovered that low proficient students perceived translation to be preferable and necessary, whereas in Dagiliene's (2012) investigation, low proficient students thought that translation was not an effective method for learning a foreign language.

In Indonesia, some research on the use of learners' L1 has also been conducted. The research investigated the use of Indonesian language in learning English. Nursanti (2016) conducted research in a bilingual classroom by inquiring about the students' perceptions. The findings showed that more than 80% of students positively responded to the use of L1 during English classroom and that bilingual setting helped them to understand the materials, reduce anxiety, and work on exercises. In another research, Fathimah (2016) investigated how L1 was used in code-switching during EFL teaching-learning process. The teacher respondent argued that the use of code-mixing was aimed at providing students exposures to English and accommodating those with low proficiency.

Despite the echoing voice of teachers who do not support the use of L1 in foreign language classrooms, it cannot be denied that in many classroom practices L1 use does exist, especially in Indonesian contexts. As both teachers and students still constantly use their L1 for various reasons, this study examines the practice of translation in EFL learning and the beliefs of university students who have high and low levels of proficiency.

METHOD

This research employs a case study design where it tries to investigate a specific entity with no modification from its reality (Stake, 2006; Yin, 2009). It investigates the use of learners' L1 and translation in learning a foreign language. Through a case study, it attempts to seek for the reasons, procedures, and consequences of the topic being examined (Schramm, 1971, as cited in Stake, 2006).

The participants were non-English major undergraduates with low and high proficiency levels and their lecturer. In this research, low proficient students were basic users of the target language while highly proficient students were independent users of the target language. By referring to the descriptors provided by Cambridge University and Educational Testing Service, independent users are those at the B1 level with TOEFL score ranging from 460 to 542 while basic users are

those at the A2 level and below with TOEFL score of 459 and below. Despite coming from non-English major, English is constantly taught to them as a requirement for accomplishing their undergraduate study. Their English course lengths vary from two to six semesters depending on the policy of each department. Students of different proficiency levels were required in this research as it aimed at contrasting their beliefs based on those level difference. The lecturer was involved in order to provide another point of view to confirm the information obtained from the students.

Students were purposively selected and asked to complete an online questionnaire adapted from Dagiliene (2012). Interviews with students from the two groups and with the lecturer were conducted to gather further information about students' beliefs on the use of translation in the English classroom.

Data from the questionnaire were analyzed based on learners' proficiency levels. The analysis searched for patterns made by learners with high and low proficiency levels regarding their beliefs on the use of translation in the English classroom. Deeper insight was gained through interview investigating reasons underlying their beliefs.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data were collected from sixteen students; eight were basic users or low proficient students, and the other eight were independent users or highly proficient students. Those university students were of non-English major and learned English twice a week as a compulsory subject. The lingua franca which they use in their daily lives is Indonesian language since they come from various regions.

When asked whether or not their lecturer employed translation activities in their English classroom, nine out of sixteen students answered 'yes'. It was supported by the data gained from the interview with the lecturer confirming that he used Indonesian language and translation activities in his teaching. Indonesian language was used when the given instructions were too long and complicated. The lecturer chose to do so as students often experienced misunderstanding of full English instructions which might result in irrelevant students' learning output.

The findings of this research were presented based on thematic questions. Answers to each question from both low and highly proficient students can be elaborated as follows.

How beneficial are L1 and translation activities in learning English as a foreign language?
When being asked about how beneficial L1 was, 6 out of 8 low proficient students perceived it to be beneficial to their foreign language learning while 50% of highly proficient students shared the same opinion. The rest of them were doubtful about it.

Regarding the use of translation activities in EFL contexts, 75% of low proficient students and 87.5% of highly proficient students had opinion that it was beneficial. The rest were not sure about it.

When discussing on what areas the impact was, most students from the two proficiency levels agreed that the linguistic aspect benefitting the most from the use of L1 and translation was vocabulary. Indonesian language provides an instant way of understanding meanings of unfamiliar words. The other advantages were helping students to understand sentences and confirming whether students' understanding was correct or not.

According to this finding, there was no significant difference on how low and highly proficient students perceived the use of L1 and translation activities in EFL contexts. They tended to agree that those two things are useful for EFL learning. Furthermore, the findings were in line with what Nursanti (2016) and Fernandez-Guerra (2014) found in their studies stating that L1 and translation were beneficial to acquire more vocabulary and understand discourses. In addition, this finding was supported by Harmer (2007a) who mentioned that the use of L1 would likely provide scaffolding for students to understand things which were too complicated for them.

Despite their positive response, those from the two different levels expressed the weaknesses of employing L1 and translation activities in EFL learning. Each student with high proficiency level mentioned several weaknesses. Three of them said that the strategy made the learning process less effective as it was undeniable that students got less exposure to English when they also used L1 in the classroom (Harmer, 2007b; Pan & Pan, 2012). Other concerns were related to being time consuming, creating confusion (Calis & Dikilitas, 2012), and being boring (Duff, 1989) especially for the highly proficient students. Several low proficient students also expressed the possibility of ineffective learning process and dependence on using L1 as translation was involved in EFL learning. Some of them argued that L1 and translation should only be used on some necessary occasions during learning.

Do you enjoy the use of L1 and translation activities in your EFL classroom?
Seven out of eight low proficient students said they enjoyed it and only two out eight highly proficient students had the same opinion. Three highly proficient students voted that sometimes they enjoyed it while the other three confirmed that they did not enjoy it.

The majority of low proficient students argued that L1 and translation helped them to comprehend learning discourses, especially those which were too complicated to grasp (Harmer, 2007a). Some students stated that translation assisted them to increase their vocabulary. Those findings were strengthened by the statement of 75% of students saying that translation should be included during EFL teaching and learning processes. The 25% actually agreed with the majority but they added that it should be employed not too frequently. Every foreign language learner brings at least one language with them into the classroom that it is inevitable for them to do translation, especially for those of beginner or low proficient level (Harmer, 2007a).

Meanwhile, three highly proficient students perceived it to be less preferable as it reduced the classroom exposure to English (Harmer, 2007b; Pan & Pan, 2012) and gave lack of pronunciation role model which for them was a bit problematic. The other three appreciated full English classroom and expressed their arguments that there should be only minimum use of L1 and translation. While highly proficient students displayed various responses to the question whether or not translation should be included in foreign language learning, students who rejected the inclusion of translation claimed that unfamiliar words could be explained using the target language and that it can get students to be accustomed to the use of English. On the other hand, those who supported the idea stated that translation could function as a shortcut and saved learning time. One student came up with a good idea saying the use translation should be considered based on the class contexts, like students' own capability to decide whether translation would either interfere or facilitate them to learn. This finding was in line with what Calis and Dikilitas (2012) found in their research, mentioning that highly proficient students do not really appreciate translation in their EFL learning. This is due to the confusion that students might find as they might not always be able to find the perfect meaning equivalence in another language.

What does the teacher say?
While students from across proficiency levels did not really show a gap in their perceptions toward the use of L1 and translation activities, the lecturer respondent of this study had a different opinion for those low and highly proficient students. He argued that less or no use of L1 and translation activities was employed for the highly proficient students, whereas for those of low proficiency, he felt the need to use Indonesian language and translation activities. While his ultimate goal was to have a full English class, he could not deny the necessity of pedagogical translation for learning processes. One of the reasons he stated for his action was to avoid misunderstanding of instructions, meanings, or explanations, especially for the long and complicated ones. He also shared some experience of certain occasions where giving complicated instructions in full English to the low proficient students often resulted in misunderstanding.

The abovementioned findings accord with what Fathimah (2016) and Asgarian (2012) figured out in their research that L1 and translation were particularly employed and perceived to be beneficial to deal with low-proficient learners. They argued that returning to learners' L1 will make the learning more effective especially when dealing with this type of learners.

CONCLUSION

Learners from across proficiency levels perceived the use of L1 and translation to be beneficial to their EFL learning, especially for improving their vocabulary, understanding, and confirming understanding of explanations or discourses in the target language. However, their positive responses also came up with their awareness of weaknesses that might be posed by the use of L1 and translation when they were involved in EFL learning processes.

In terms of whether or not the learners enjoyed the use of L1 and translation, students with high proficiency seemed to have stronger beliefs that those types of learning activities were not preferable. Ineffective learning and limited exposure to the target language became the main reasons behind their opinions. As those students' proficiency was relatively good enough that their competence in the target language would suffice, it is normal for them to expect classes in full English.

While learners' perceptions were pretty much similar, unlike their preference, the lecturer's treatment to students of different proficiency levels was indeed different. For the reasons of effective language learning and avoidance of misunderstanding, L1 and translation activities were more likely to be employed by the lecturer to teach low proficient students. Further research which includes more data from observation is needed to either confirm or disprove, and deepen the analysis in this study.

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