

Effect of translation practice on vocabulary acquisition in L2 Spanish

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Research in second language (L2) vocabulary learning and teaching has recently regained interest in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Likewise, studies in translation have focused on L1-L2 translation because it is a highly demanding task that involves searching for form, recalling, and evaluating (Laufer & Girsai, 2008). Yet, L2-L1 translation practice and vocabulary acquisition have not been discussed sufficiently. L2-L1 translation requires searching for meaning, recognition of word form, and later use in word production.

This study explores a possible effect of L2 Spanish to English translation practice on reception and production of L2 vocabulary. Two groups of third-year L2 Spanish learners at a multicultural post-secondary institution participated. The learners read a short story in Spanish, wrote a summary of the story in Spanish, and participated in a detailed discussion of the vocabulary and content of the story. A key activity was the translation from Spanish into English of an excerpt from the short story performed by one of the groups. All students did a posttest in Spanish which included vocabulary recognition, supplying synonyms or antonyms, and applying vocabulary in context. Two questions motivated the study: Does translation practice help students recognize new Spanish vocabulary? Does translation practice help students produce new vocabulary in correct contexts? Results showed that there was a minimal difference between the two groups on vocabulary recognition, but the group that performed the translation task performed better on the vocabulary production task. A follow up study will test whether similar tendencies are observed when translating from English into L2 Spanish.

Key words: Spanish, vocabulary, translation.

1 Introduction

1.1 Why translation?

Translation, as defined in the Oxford English Dictionary, is the action or process of turning from one language into another or the product of this, or, also, a version in a different language. Yet, L2-L1 translation practice and vocabulary acquisition have not been sufficiently discussed. While L2-L1 translation requires searching for meaning, recognition of word form, and later use in word production, L2-L1 translation is less common in L2 instruction than L1-L2, but textbooks are designed so that students have to learn equivalents of Spanish words in English.

Laufer and Girsai (2008) conducted a study of effect of explicit contrastive analysis and translation on L2 vocabulary learning. They explain why translation is a valuable exercise for vocabulary learning:

“Translation tasks embody the element of need since the words that have to be understood (when translating into L1), or produced (when translating into L2) are predetermined by the source text. The element of search is present as well.... Most importantly, an element of evaluation is necessary to carry out translation activity. There is usually more than one translation alternative for a given sentence. Therefore, when translating, learners have to make a decision as to how each alternative fits the text they create” (Laufer & Girsai, p. 698).

To summarize this section, studies in translation have recently focused on L1-L2 translation because it is a highly demanding task that involves searching for form, recalling, and evaluating.

1.2 About the study

This project focuses on L2 - L1 translation as an exercise which can be useful for vocabulary teaching and learning. One of the recent studies that motivated this project was the article by Pavlenko (2000), who found a significant effect of L1 on L2 vocabulary production in late bilinguals. Therefore, this pilot study explores a possible effect of L2 Spanish to English translation practice on reception and production of L2 Spanish vocabulary in third year university students.

In the paper I attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. Does translation practice help students recognize new Spanish vocabulary?

2. Does translation practice help students produce new vocabulary in correct contexts?

2 Literature review

In the early 1980s vocabulary acquisition was called “a neglected aspect of language learning” (Meara, 1980, p. 221). It was not until then that research in vocabulary learning and teaching garnered interest amongst Second Language Acquisition (SLA) researchers. Prior to this shift, research was principally focused on issues of grammar and orthography. Recent studies highlight the importance of the study of second language (L2) vocabulary acquisition. For example, Gass and Selinker (2001) found that: first, lexical errors, meaning vocabulary errors, constitute most L2 errors and second, both learners and native speakers view lexical errors as the most serious and disruptive obstacles to communication (p. 372). However, research in foreign language vocabulary teaching and learning is still scarce (Bruton, 2007). The importance of vocabulary acquisition lies in the need to express one’s thoughts in a foreign language. Nowadays, vocabulary acquisition is one of the main aspects of students’ attention when it comes to language learning. They stress the necessity to learn vocabulary through various exercises: reading, repetition, using words in context, conversations and, most certainly, translations.

The study by J. F. Kroll and Stewart (discussed in Kroll et al, 2010) addresses the representation, processes and strategies that are used when skilled adult bilinguals speak words and process sentences in each of their two languages (p.104). The Revised Hierarchical Model (RHM), proposed by Kroll, accounts for the development of conceptual processing with increasing L2 skill. “A clear prediction of RHM is that translation from L2 to L1 should be in place early in acquisition, whereas L1 - L2 translation, which requires conceptual access, will be more difficult for learners to perform. If L2 is linked to L1 initially for the purpose of accessing meaning, then those connections should be the first available to the learner” (p. 115). The authors suggest that at early stages of language acquisition, the students approach the study linking word-for-word from the L2 to L1. In other words, they constantly translate, and therefore, are unable to “think” in the L2. However, as their proficiency in L2 increases, they begin to access the conceptual level which is assumed to be common in the two languages. That is, words in each of the bilingual’s languages access a common semantic code. Kroll concludes that in fairly proficient learners L2-L1 and L1-L2 translations are not lexically mediated through L1 (2010).

3 The current study

This study enriches the field by providing data that possibly supports the use of L2 - L1 translation tasks for high intermediate (i.e. third year) Spanish language learners in the Canadian university system. For the purpose of this study we used translation not as a final test, but rather as an extra step in vocabulary teaching.

3.1 Participants

Two classes of 35 third year Spanish students from a post-secondary institution in Canada were divided into two groups. Only the students who were present during all the treatment procedures and the post-test (Group A, N=14 and Group B, N=15 students from each group) were included in the study (total number of participants was 29). We called Group B “Experimental group” since these students performed the translation task as opposed to Group A that did not. Both groups were taught by the same language instructor to control instruction conditions.

3.2 Instruments and procedures

3.2.1 *Background Questionnaire*

Students answered questions about their language learning experience prior and during their UBC studies, as well as about basic demographic information. Some example questions were: “What is your mother tongue?” and “What other languages do you speak?”

3.2.2 *Short story reading passage*

The students were asked to read the story “Continuity of the parks” in Spanish by Julio Cortazar, which was a part of their course program. The text that students read for the purpose of the study had some vocabulary glosses in the book. We assume that the glossed words were equally new for all students. The participants read the story at home and they used a dictionary to search for unfamiliar words.

3.2.3 *Comprehension and vocabulary questions*

The participants discussed the contents of the story in class under the supervision of their instructor. The researcher was present during the class discussion, observing their interactions, as well as the instructor’s assistance. It should be noted that there was minimal English used in class and the students were

encouraged to express themselves only in Spanish. The explanations of unfamiliar words were given in Spanish as well.

3.2.4 Summary of the story

After reading and discussing the story, the students wrote a short summary of the text in Spanish. The purpose was to make sure that everyone understood the plot of the story. The instructor collected the assignments.

3.2.5 Translation from Spanish into English

Only Group B (experimental group) performed the translation task. They were asked to write a translation of an excerpt of the story specified by the instructor. Because the entire story was considered by the course instructor to be too long for translation, the chosen excerpt was much shorter, so that the students had time to work on it in class. They performed the translation during 15 minutes of the class time. No dictionary use was allowed, but we suppose that the students' own notes in the text were used in the process of translating. Not everybody had time to complete this task, but all the answers were collected and analyzed by the researcher. The part of the story used for translation from Spanish into English is presented in the Appendix.

3.2.6 Delayed task

The last part of the procedure, performed three weeks after the translation task, consisted of three elements. First, the participants were asked to choose a correct answer to complete a word definition. Second, they supplied synonyms and antonyms for the given vocabulary items. Finally, they were asked to write complete sentences with the given words and expressions.

The delayed task was designed particularly for this project in order to see the effect of L2 - L1 translation exercise, performed by Group B, compared to no translation task in Group A, on vocabulary acquisition. By applying a delayed task, we measured not immediate but delayed vocabulary acquisition results. A variety of questions are included in the task as both comprehension and production measures. The definitions of "synonym" and "antonym" were written next to the questions for the students to be clear on what they mean, in case they were not familiar with the terms. The explanation was given in Spanish as well as all the instructions in the delayed task.

4 Results

4.1 Contextualized vocabulary recognition: providing the correct term for a definition.

By looking at the Figure 1, we can see that Group B, the experimental group has outperformed Group A on this part of the vocabulary recognition task. The group that had done the translation task has demonstrated a greater level of new vocabulary recognition by choosing a greater number of correct definitions of vocabulary items. It is important to note, however, that both groups have shown extremely high levels of vocabulary recognition (Group A – 92% and Group B – 94%).

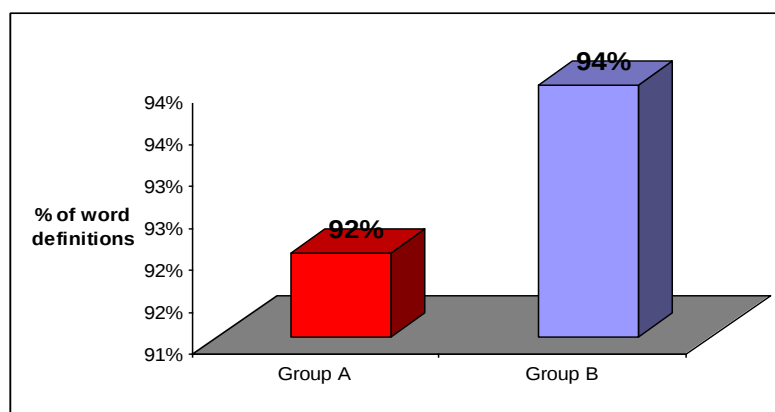


Figure 1.

4.2 Vocabulary recognition: providing correct synonyms and antonyms to the given vocabulary items.

Figure 2 above shows that the results of the second part of the delayed task are contradictory to the results of the first task. In other words, the results show that the experimental Group B performed scored lower than the non-experimental Group A on the vocabulary recognition task (77% versus 83%). If we collapse the results of the first and the second tasks, the results will cancel each other out. Thus, we conclude that the overall results of the recognition tasks are inconclusive since we did not find any clear results.

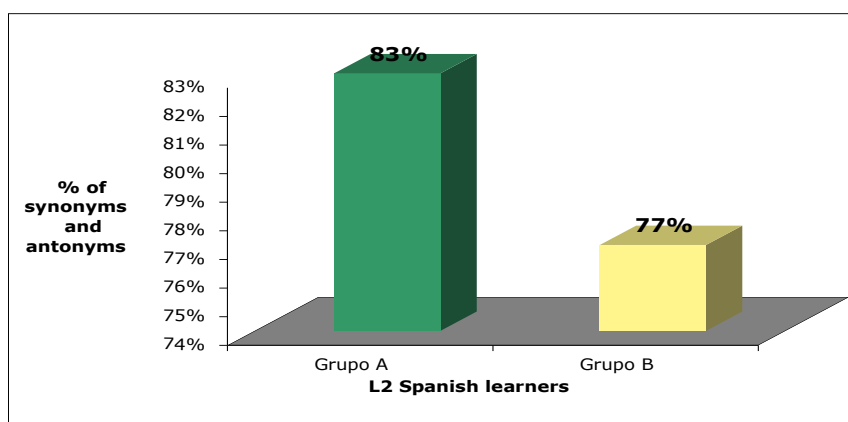


Figure 2.

4.3 Vocabulary production: write complete sentences with the given vocabulary items.

The results of the last part of the delayed task (figure 3), which focused on the production of the vocabulary in context, have shown a significant advantage of the experimental Group B over the non-experimental one (93% versus 83%). Based on these results we conclude that the translation exercise performed by Group B has had a positive effect on the vocabulary production in our participants.

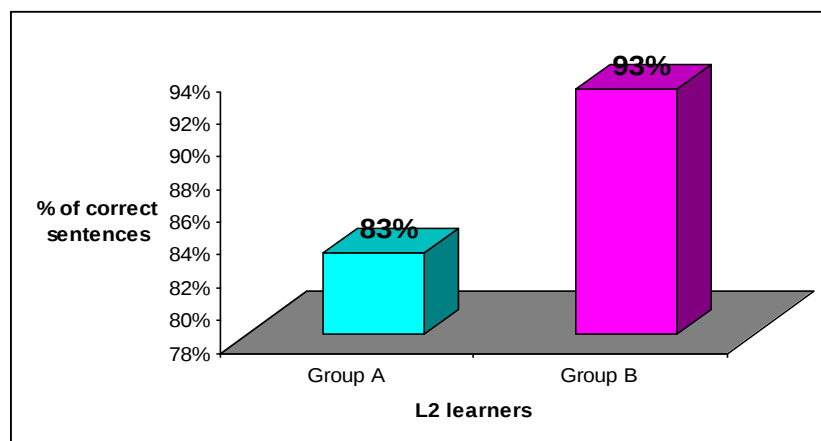


Figure 3.

5 Discussion

The results of the delayed task have showed no significant difference between the two groups on vocabulary recognition task, but there is a noticeable advantage of Group B over Group A on the vocabulary production task. Although, based on some previous findings in the field, we would expect the influence of L2 - L1 translation on vocabulary recognition; our study has shown a stronger influence of translation on the production of new vocabulary, at least in our sample of students. Nevertheless, both groups have performed very highly on all three tasks involved in vocabulary acquisition. This conclusion leads to the next part: limitations and implications for further study.

5.1 Limitations

While performing this study we have encountered some important limitations of the study: the size of the participant sample was too small to see any significant results, the corpus of target vocabulary items could be larger in order to provide for a wider range of questions, and the time constraint for the translation task was an issue as well.

5.2 Implications for further study

Since this particular area has not been extensively researched, this will be a suitable subject of a future study. Next time, we should include only new vocabulary items and preferably pretest those words on a small group of participants. In addition, L1 - L2 translation would complement the results of L2-L1 translation which will focus on language production. We will compare the new results with the ones found in the present study in order to analyze a change in tendency of the results. Finally, a longitudinal study would be beneficial, as it would allow us to see how this exercise affects students at different levels of language learning (from beginners to advanced learners).

6 Conclusion

This study explored a possible effect of L2 Spanish to English translation practice on reception and production of L2 vocabulary. Based on our limited results of the vocabulary recognition task, we concluded that there was no significant difference between the two groups of participants after the experimental group performed the translation task. In other words the participants who translated the text from Spanish into English performed very much like the group that did not do the translation. Therefore, the results of the vocabulary recognition tasks are inconclusive at this stage of our research. On the contrary,

in the third task, which focused on the production of vocabulary, the experimental Group B showed a noticeable advantage over the Group A. A follow up study will test whether similar tendencies are observed when translating from English into Spanish in a larger context while paying close attention to the multicultural composition of classes.

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Appendix

Continuidad de los parques by Julio Cortazar (1956)

Había empezado a leer la novela unos días antes. La abandonó por negocios urgentes, volvió a abrirla cuando regresaba en tren a la finca; se dejaba interesar lentamente por la trama, por el dibujo de los personajes. Esa tarde, después de escribir una carta a su apoderado y discutir con el mayordomo una cuestión de aparcerías, volvió al libro en la tranquilidad del estudio que miraba hacia el parque de los robles. Arrellanado en su sillón favorito, de espaldas a la puerta que lo hubiera molestado como una irritante posibilidad de intrusiones, dejó que su mano izquierda acariciara una y otra vez el terciopelo verde y se puso a leer los últimos capítulos. Su memoria retenía sin esfuerzo los nombres y las imágenes de los protagonistas; la ilusión novelesca lo ganó casi en seguida. Gozaba del placer casi perverso de irse desgajando línea a línea de lo que lo rodeaba, y sentir a la

vez que su cabeza descansaba cómodamente en el terciopelo del alto respaldo, que los cigarrillos seguían al alcance de la mano, que más allá de los ventanales danzaba el aire del atardecer bajo los robles. Palabra a palabra, absorbido por la sórdida disyuntiva de los héroes, dejándose ir hacia las imágenes que se concertaban y adquirían color y movimiento, fue testigo del último encuentro en la cabaña del monte