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ENHANCING ISOLATED GRAMMAR TEACHING THROUGH TRANSLATION: SENTENCE LEVEL AND BEYOND

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Abstract
Associated with grammar-translation method, translation is still often seen as a mere replacement of linguistic forms, which is a far cry from its nature as an act of communication. On the other hand, while being criticized for not assisting learners enough to use grammar in a communication context, isolated grammar teaching has its own merits and is still widely practiced. By implementing translation for meaning-making, this action research seeks to examine how translation may be integrated into the traditional grammar teaching to assist tertiary EFL students to learn L2 forms in communicative contexts. With translation employed at the sentence and discourse levels after the practice session, it was revealed through the participants' reflections that translation exercises may further consolidate students' knowledge of how to use specific forms in various contexts, especially as it relates to lexico-grammatical aspects, help deal with L1 interferences, and are an effective way to raise students' awareness of the essential role of grammar in meaning-making.

Keywords: translation, explicit instruction, grammar teaching

Introduction
With the role of L1 being increasingly recognized in language teaching and learning, translation has been reassessed and slowly reintroduced to enhance language learning. More and more research demonstrates no reason why translation cannot be applied in L2 classrooms (Carreres, 2006; Dagilienė, 2012; Fernández-Guerra, 2014; Kim, 2011; Liao, 2006; Machida, 2008; Van Dyk, 2009). Despite this, there is still very little research on how translation may be applied to assist language learners, especially in grammar learning as a case in point. After being shunned for decades due to its negative associations with the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), its utilization in grammar learning seems to be still highly stigmatized. Often viewed as a mere replacement of linguistic forms, translation is frequently misunderstood to have little communicative value. However, as a skill of mediation between languages and hence cultures, translation may potentially assist grammar learning beyond just producing grammatically acceptable forms. As grammar has a crucial role in language learning (Thornbury, 2002), it is paramount to explore ways on how the act of translating may assist students in learning L2 forms. Pertinent to this, it is

imperative to explore ways to improve students' learning experience in isolated grammar teaching, which is still commonly implemented at tertiary EFL programs. Despite its superiority in assisting learners to gain explicit knowledge of L2 forms, it does not allow them enough opportunities for meaning-making in a communicative context. To overcome this problem, this action research aimed to discover how translation may enhance the grammar teaching approach using translation practice at the sentence and discourse levels. This article will be of interest to EFL language practitioners, especially those working at higher education, and those interested in grammar teaching in general.

Literature Review

Grammar teaching and learning

With grammar playing an essential role in language learning, scholars and practitioners have seen it crucial to address form in language learning programs (Ellis, 2016). In general, grammar learning may be delivered separately or integratively, which are often differentiated as *focus on forms* and *focus on form* (Long, 2016). The term focus on forms (FonFs) usually refers to the more traditional way of grammar teaching, which utilizes explicit techniques to attend to form as an object of study and typically involves direct reference to rules. On the other hand, focus on form (FonF) is "various techniques designed to attract learners' attention to form while they are using L2 as a tool for communicating" (Ellis, 2016, p.409).

Each approach has its own merits and downsides, but both may be regarded as complementary in language learning (Ellis, 2015). Focus on form (FonF), being associated more with a 'communicative' way of learning, seems to be more theoretically favored. It allows students to learn about form in L2 communicative contexts with more individualized feedback and is believed to be more useful to develop grammar competence. Despite this, the traditional way is still widely practiced (Larsen-Freeman, 2015), especially in EFL settings with large classes (see Poole, 2005). It is considered to be more effective to facilitate "noticing" forms to help students understand the meanings of grammatical items and to promote accuracy (De Keyser, 1998; Murtisari, Hastuti, & Arsari, 2019; Murtisari, Salvadora, & Hastuti, 2020; Sheen, 2005). Conducting an experimental study on FonF and FonFs, Sheen (2005) found that his sixth-grade participants who received a FonFs instruction significantly improved their grammar scores in a posttest, while those receiving a FonF one continued producing largely incorrect forms. Therefore, he does not believe that FonFs should be excluded from second language learning.

However, with less communicative content compared to that of focus on form, the traditional method may not facilitate students to understand how to use L2 forms naturally. Such non-alignment between explicit instruction and usage may reduce the chance to transfer the form to productive use (see Larsen-Freeman, 2015). Furthermore, although explicit knowledge has stronger short-term effects, it diminishes over time (Umeda, Snape, Yusa, & Wiltshier, 2017). Follow-up is imperative to assist students to gain further benefits from traditional grammar teaching.

Use of translation in grammar teaching

The use of translation in grammar class seems limited to GTM, which is usually non-communicative. This method traditionally used L1 as a medium of instruction, and the teacher, who becomes the center of the class, does not have to be fluent in L2. Besides, grammar learning is carried out deductively in which students are asked to memorize the rules and practice them in the exercises. A typical activity in GTM is translating decontextualized inauthentic sentences from L1 into L2 or the other way around. Emphasis is given to formal accuracy rather than fluency (Zhou & Niu, 2015). With all these characteristics, GTM is considered boring (Scheffler, 2013) and not designed to assist students to communicate in L2 in real-life settings. It is therefore not surprising that as Celce-Murcia (2012) pointed out, "[T]he result of this approach is usually an inability on the part of students to use the language for communication" (p. 5).

However, none of the traits generally associated with GTM are inherent features of the use of translation for teaching grammar (Thornbury, 2010). As Thornbury noticed (2010, par.5-6), “They are simply excess baggage that [grammar translation] accreted in its passage through the nineteenth century”, and “[t]he notions of fluency, skills work, and whole texts are not in the least incompatible with a translation-mediated approach”. Therefore, the use of translation in language teaching/learning needs to be advocated as a mediation skill, rather than just an activity of finding verbal equivalence across languages. The translation practice in general needs to be aimed to produce ’functional’ translations that meet the purpose of the communicative context and use natural expressions of the target language. Utilizing authentic communicative texts at the sentence level and beyond will make such tasks possible as they usually reveal semantic and pragmatic differences between L1 and L2. However, the translation items should be carefully adjusted to the language level of the learners so they will not be too challenging to translate (see also Salem, 2012).

Advantages may be gained by students from translating in their grammar learning. First, by acknowledging the relevance of L1 in L2 learning, translation may scaffold students' learning with the students' mother tongue and enable teachers to deal with issues related to L1 use. As a crucial means of learners' cognitive functions, L1 is inseparable from the process of L2 learning. Besides facilitating students in constructing meaning in L2, using translation may also increase their awareness of differences between L1 and L2. According to Cook (2010, p.55), "conscious awareness of [L1-L2] differences" is indispensable for students to be able to negotiate meaning interlingually for various situations, audiences, and purposes. Rather than cause disruptions as some individuals consider, translation helps students find more natural forms in L2. Instead of utilizing only mental translations, learners can mediate between L1 and L2 forms through communicative translation practices.

Second, translation may offer students more interactions in meaning than the use of a “trigger-structure association”, like by changing the main verbs into certain forms and other cloze exercises (Salem, 2012). Although the application of cues in a "trigger-structure association" is widely done in grammar learning, it is challenging, because in real-life "language is not normally elicited by triggers" but "it is produced to convey meaning" (Salem, 2012, p.147-8). Hence, grammar is not only used to communicate, as it is connected with vocabulary elicitation,

comprising the semantic and pragmatic features of the statement. Furthermore, by aligning the form to students' L1, which tends to be the predominant cognitive system, translation may help learners to make L2 forms more meaningful and further internalize them in their thinking processes.

The use of translation in grammar learning can be very versatile as a general means of scaffolding with the use of L1. However, to significantly enhance the study of specific grammatical forms, it should be given a substantial amount of time to allow deep learning. During the translation practice, learners not only construct sentences in L2 but also need to mediate meaning between L1 and L2 by considering different lexico-grammatical and pragmatic aspects, which requires time to do. The resulting translations also need to be assessed and discussed when students produce problematic renderings. According to Salem (2012), care is also necessary for designing the materials to avoid problems such as if the L1 trigger is too difficult to translate or has "textual flaws" (p.147) because they are "poorly worded" (p.153). For the latter, Salem identified, the L1 sentence may be redundant and needs to be paraphrased to produce a proper L2 sentence, or the L1's context is unclear or ambiguous. It is also essential to be careful with items that potentially lead to unnatural responses in L2. Such items should only be used to highlight common differences between L1 and L2 which may affect students' use of the target form. When involving challenging but useful idiomatic L2 expressions, students also need ample support to be able to produce desirable renderings (for instance, by being given the L2 expressions). This kind of issue needs to be addressed because, unlike skillful translators, learners' capacity to translate is still limited due to restricted L2 knowledge.

Method

Context of the study

This study was conducted to discover how translation at the sentence and discourse levels may help overcome the downsides of isolated grammar teaching where students are normally more focused on learning the formal features of discrete L2 forms but do not have enough opportunities for meaning engagement in an authentic communicative context. This small scale action research was carried out in an English undergraduate program of a well-respected university in Central Java, Indonesia. The topic of the differences between the simple past and the present perfect was selected because Indonesian students often find it difficult to differentiate the two.

In the English program where the study took place, grammar was taught both in separate courses and integratively in skill-courses. In the independent courses, grammar was typically taught using the PPP method (presentation, practice, and production). With the time limitation, however, the isolated grammar teaching session in this preliminary study only consisted of presentation and practice. It was then followed by translation practice.

Participants

A total of ten third-year EFL students enrolled in a four-year bachelor's degree program participated in this research. They were taking an introductory translation course in which language focus is an integral part.

Instruments and data collection

Students' reflections were used as instruments to collect data on how they perceived the use of translation practice in learning L2 forms in isolated grammar teaching. Before writing their reflections, they were given a short briefing to write what they thought as honestly as possible and assured that their opinions about the use of translation would not affect their grades.

The procedure of grammar teaching

For the present research, grammar teaching was conducted in two meetings with English as the main medium of instruction. They were taught by the researcher with the following structure.

1. The presentation and practice of the grammar lesson (First meeting - 2x50 minutes)

In the first meeting, the students were taught about comparing the simple past tense and the present perfect tense based on teaching material developed by Bolton and Goodey (2013). This material was written for pre-intermediate to upper-intermediate students, which suited the levels of the study participants. The presentation and practice session may be further clarified as follows.

a. Presentation

The presentation began with a brief introduction to prepare the students for the topic by asking them whether they had had lunch and what time they had it ('Have you had lunch?'; 'When did you have it?'). The students were also requested to ask the instructor the same questions. Then the instructor guided the students to formulate the rules of the two tenses on the board. After this, the participants were given printed material adapted from Bolton and Goodey (2013). The material consisted of four parts, each supplemented with a short text (around 80 words) illustrating different aspects of the target forms and followed by an explanation about them. All the texts were related to each other about a missing teenager. The four parts covered the differences between the past and simple and common time expressions that could be used with them. Every part ended with four questions to check students' comprehension of the meanings/uses of the relevant forms.

b. Practice

Following the presentation session, the instructor gave a very brief summary to contrast the simple past and the present perfect tenses. After this, the students did three exercises, which consisted of one matching exercise, one cloze exercise, and choosing the correct form for a specific context. Altogether, they consisted of 30 items that required students to select forms representing the simple past or the present perfect tense. The students were asked to work individually, and then the answers were thoroughly discussed. For most of the session, English was used without sacrificing students' understanding to give students more exposure to the foreign language.

2. The translation practice (Second meeting – 2x50 Minutes)

The second meeting was conducted the next day and started with a brief review of the differences between the two tenses. The students were later given three types of translation exercises at sentence and discourse levels which required students to work individually to decide which tense to use. The sentences and texts were designed to reflect authentic daily communication, which is crucial to link between the explicit instructions and the contexts of use of the target forms.

a. Translating sentences (16 sentences)

This sentence-level practice was aimed to assist students to produce complete propositions in the target forms at the lowest level. The meaning context was made clear to help students construct the desired response. Most sentences normally had one expected answer (see sentence a-b), but several had two or more possible correct responses (see sentence c), with possible different meaning nuances (e.g., formal/informal overtones). Such a variety of items can help develop students' language awareness and understanding that translation is not based on straight-forward meaning equivalence.

Examples:

a) *Saya sudah makan dua kali pagi ini.* (Time: It's still in the morning) – (expected response: 'I've eaten twice this morning')
b) *Saya makan dua kali pagi ini.* (Time: It's 1 pm now) – (expected response: 'I ate twice this morning').
c) *Kakak perempuan saya belum pernah ke Salatiga*. (possible answers: 'My (older) sister's never been to Salatiga' or 'My (older) sister's never visited Salatiga').

b. Translating conversations (4 short exchanges)

This type of exercise was meant to teach students how the grammatical form(s) may be used in communicative speech discourse.

Example (with possible translations):

Andi: *Saya sudah lama tidak melihat Toni.* ('I haven't seen Toni for ages/ a long time')
Budi: *Oh, dia sudah pindah ke Semarang.* ('Oh, he's moved to Semarang')
Andi: *Yang betul? Kapan dia pergi?* ('Really?/You're kidding/You can't be serious/Are you sure? When did he leave/move?')
Budi: *Tahun lalu.* ('Last year')

c. Translating a very short news text (3 long sentences)

This discourse-level practice served to introduce how the target forms may be used in a written text. The discussion of students' translations might involve issues of coherence, such as how the word repetitions should be minimized. In the example below, for instance, the word "boy" was used for the first time, and then "child" was used to avoid redundancy. The topic of the text was made similar to the texts given in the presentation session (first meeting) to help students relate to what had been studied and facilitate a better understanding.

Example:
Seorang anak laki-laki yang hilang akhir minggu lalu di Philipi East sudah ditemukan. Sivenanthi Marongile menghilang saat bermain dengan seorang teman pada hari Sabtu. Polisi mengatakan bahwa anak tersebut ditemukan Minggu pagi.

(A boy who went missing in Philipi East last week has been found. Sivenanthi Marongile disappeared while playing with a friend on Saturday. The police said the child was found on Sunday morning.).

Findings and Discussion

The data were analyzed using a thematic analysis which was done by frequently reading the reflection to familiarize the researcher with the content and a basis to establish the emerging themes. An examination of the reflections revealed three aspects of students' experiences in using translation to learn grammar. These aspects consisted of their feelings and opinions about the translation practice, and their reasons for them, which constituted their perceived benefits of using translation in their grammar practice. Overall, the study revealed favorable beliefs towards the application of translation in learning L2 forms, which refute, as Liao (2006) points out, the commonly held assumption under the communicative language teaching approach that translation is detrimental to language learning.

Feelings and general views

The participants reported positive feelings towards the use of translation in the grammar class. Two students (S5 and S8) mentioned they were pleased to join the grammar class, especially the translation session. One student (S3) said the class was motivating. She believed the translation activities were more stimulating than the previous part of the grammar class. As she put it, "The usual grammar practice made me sleepy, and I did not pay a lot of attention [to the lesson]." Two other students said doing the translation exercise was fun (S3 and S6). This demonstrates that translation is not necessarily a dull activity for learning grammar when appropriately incorporated. One possible reason for this is it is more cognitively engaging (Duff, 1989) than conventional grammatical exercises because students are involved in meaning-making (Salem, 2012). One may argue that to take learners to a higher order of learning like this, one does not have to resort to translating. By writing directly in L2, one may also achieve this. However, considering that mental translation from L1 is common among L2 learners (Cohen, Brooks-Carson, & Jacobs-Cassuto, 2000; Hu, 2003), translation exercises may provide a tool for checking students' L2 production for possible L1 areas of interference and deal with them to help learners consolidate the new L2 information into the already established L1 knowledge.

Furthermore, while not all the participants expressed their feelings about the translation component, all of them had positive views towards it. S1, S2, S4, S5, S6, and S7 said that the translation exercises were helpful. S3 and S4 believed that the translation practice was essential to help them learn the specific L2 forms being taught. Three students (S1, S3, and S4) reported that differentiating the simple past and the present perfect was perplexing, and the translation exercises

were challenging (S1 and S3). This may have been because they had to work harder to reproduce the meanings from L1 to L2 rather than just construct the correct forms with the available words like in the previous traditional practice. Regardless, all of these participants felt the translation exercises assisted them greatly. S1 and S3 reported an excellent understanding of how the two tenses differ, while S4 mentioned that the translation practice was an "effective" way of learning grammar. All these positive feelings/views strongly echo positive previous research findings on students' perceptions or attitudes towards the use of translation in language learning/teaching (e.g. Carreres, 2006; Dagilienė, 2012; Liao, 2006; Machida, 2008).

Benefits of integrating translation in grammar teaching

The participants' reflections showed the following recurrent themes on the benefits of incorporating translation into grammar learning, such as:

1. Allowing deeper learning of specific grammatical items

S1, S2, S3, S6, and S9 or half of the participants believed that the translation component allowed them to learn the target forms deeper than they did in the first meeting of the grammar class. According to S1, this was because they not only had to choose which particular form to use in a specific context but they also practiced other relevant aspects of using the target form like how to use related vocabulary words. This finding corroborates Colina and Lafford's (2018) view that translation may help illuminate various aspects of texts, which allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how L2 forms work in context. Here, the translation practice could significantly enhance traditional grammar teaching beyond just enabling students to understand the meanings of specific forms and construct them correctly. By mediating meaning from L1, it further engaged students to learn grammar as a practice of meaning-making to be able to communicate effectively in L2.

2. Increasing language awareness

The incorporation of translation into grammar teaching fosters the students to increase their language awareness. First, the students understand the meanings and uses of vocabulary items that frequently co-occur with a specific grammatical form. Half of the participants reported that the translation component allowed them to learn the semantic nuances of words relevant to the use of the target forms. S8, for instance, wrote that she learned the difference between 'gone to a place', which is a literal translation of an Indonesian source text, and 'been to a place'. Another student (S6) mentioned how the word 'yet' in 'I haven't done it yet' makes the meaning different from 'I haven't done it'. In Indonesian, both of the sentences may be expressed in the same form, not capturing the specific meaning of 'yet'. Here, it was interesting to note that although the use of words such as 'yet' and 'already' had been addressed in the previous meeting, the students did not notice their meanings until they applied them in the translation practice (often inaccurately due to the literal translation from Indonesian). This shows that the integration of translation may promote learning of the lexico-grammatical aspect, which makes up an area of translation sub-skill (Leonardi, 2011). This benefit will be invaluable in language learning because "grammar and

lexis are completely interdependent" (Salem, 2007, p. 2012) and is therefore central in developing grammar competence for communication.

Second, the students understand the importance of grammar in expressing meanings. Two students (S2 and S8) realized that grammar is not only about form because it plays an essential role in conveying meaning. S8 wrote how the use of 'be' in the passive may make a substantial difference in meaning. He pointed out that "Grammar affects the quality of translation". S2 realized how the use of the form is closely linked to the context of meaning. She stated she became more motivated to learn grammar to express meanings correctly in English. Such realization is crucial in language learning because many EFL students tend to pay more attention to vocabulary than grammar (Poole, 2005) and see the latter just as a matter of mechanical rules. This lack of awareness often reduces their motivation to learn L2 forms autonomously.

Third, the students understand the differences between L1 and L2. Two students (S1 and S8) wrote how Indonesian is different from English in grammar usage. S1 revealed that Indonesian has a different system of time marking from English. Because of this, she felt she needed to learn grammar to be able to express herself in English well. S8, on the other hand, wrote how one needs to adjust to the conventions of L2 in translating. Awareness that L2 works differently from L1 is paramount in language learning to deal with L1 interferences (Cook, 2010).

All the positive aspects of L2 from the reflections above show that translation may significantly enhance students' learning in isolated grammar teaching. One student (S3) believed that the translation component was indispensable in her process of understanding the simple past and the present perfect tenses. She wrote:

> If I had not joined [this translation practice], I wouldn't have understood the differences between the simple past and the present perfect tenses. [T]hey have different forms, but the meanings are very similar.

This study supports previous research findings that translation practice is a very effective means for consciousness-raising pertinent to various aspects of language learning (Kim, 2011; Murtisari, 2016; Scheffler, 2013).

Conclusion

This study shows that translation practice may assist students to learn grammar at higher levels in isolated grammar teaching. Using authentic communicative contexts, it may link explicit instructions with the contextual use of grammatical forms and engage students with meaning-making they can implement in communication. As revealed by students' reflections, translation enabled them to consolidate their previous knowledge of the target forms by understanding their meanings and uses more in-depth, helped them gain awareness of the essential role of grammar in communication, and assisted them in dealing with L1 interferences. A crucial finding was how translation may help students learn about the meanings and applications of common vocabulary words that co-occur with the target form(s), which may assist them to produce more natural expressions in L2. With a limited number of participants, this small-scale study's findings are not generalizable but overall support the view that translation can be integrated into a grammar class to create more opportunities to learn how

to use L2 forms in authentic communicative contexts. More research is necessary to reveal how the integration of translation may help learners to use the target forms in the production phase of the PPP method and how translation may be more creatively integrated into grammar instruction across different levels of L2 competence. Ultimately, the latter should lead to the development of an instructional model that may optimally help tap the potentials of translation to assist grammar learning.

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