Translation and Back Translation in an EFL Reading class

Overview

The methods most recently applied by EFL researchers have typically been either "retrospective" or "introspective". The "retrospective" method is exemplified by the use of multiple-choice questions, true/false statements, sentence completion exercises, and written recalls of the reading passage (Carrell, 1984; 1991; Cerrell and Connor, 1984; et alia). The "introspective" method includes the use of "think-aloud" protocols (i.e. the retelling of what was going on inside the reader's mind while reading and after it) (Block, 1986; 1992).

The insights gained about the reading process as a result of employing these techniques have without doubt influenced our understanding of the nature of the reading process. However, the impact of such insights on classroom procedures is open to debate. Not only that, but the adoption of the afore-mentioned techniques by researchers has led to their recurrent use (e.g. multiple-choice, true/false statements, etc...) in the EFL reading class to such an extent that they have dominated all EFL instructors' practices for checking reading comprehension. This approach has mistakenly led student readers to perceive reading as a receptive, and static process, rather than an active, participatory one involving the dynamic contributions of a reader (Zamel, 1992). Even worse, EFL reading instructors (e.g. Arab EFL reading instructors) have come to consider these retrospective techniques as optimal in their methods of teaching reading. One is tempted to state that the classroom procedures typical of EFL reading instruction including many Arab EFL reading classes are inadequate when judged on the bases of a sound theory of reading namely as a process of interaction in which the reader brings his world knowledge to bear on the text in order to reconstruct meaning.

The techniques and the actual nature of the reading process

The use of the multiple-choice and true-false statements have the advantage, as Block (1986: 463) puts it:

"of keeping the reading process intact while having the disadvantage of being inaccurate or distorted."
The potential disadvantage of being inaccurate or distorted may lie in the fact that multiple-choice questions test the reader's understanding of the content/information of the text only. They don't seem to test the variance in the weight and rank of segments of information within a clause, a sentence or a short text in relation to the rhetorical purpose or the writer's "dominant contextual focus" (Werlich 1983: 19). According to Werlich:

"texts distinctively correlate with the contextual factors in a communication. They conventionally focus the addressee's attention only on specific factors. Accordingly, texts can be grouped together and generally classified on the basis of their dominant contextual focus."

It seems that the way these techniques (the multiple-choice questions, the true/false statements and sentence completion exercises) have been employed inevitably led to a downplaying of the interaction between the dominant contextual focus and the linguistic devices used to serve it; it may also be the case that these techniques did not grasp the multidimensionality of texts (i.e. the blending of reporting and evaluating within the same text whose dominant contextual focus as a whole is either to argue, counter-argue, or report).

To illustrate, I borrow the following text from Carrell (175-7): (used as a reading placement test).

**Is English Degenerating**

The charge that English is degenerating into a sloppy and ungrammatical language is not new. Although this charge has been made since the seventeenth century, English is still strong and growing. English was never perfect, and it never followed unchanging rules.

Alarmists often cite the use of slang and euphemisms as proof that English Language is degenerating. These people claim that the use of slang words instead of "standard" words and the use of euphemisms instead of more "exact" phrases cause English users to speak and write unclearly. Also, these people argue that the
"incorrect" grammar of many English speakers and writers proves that the language is degenerating; they believe that if speakers do not express themselves in 'standard' English they will not be understood by others. They believe that unclear thinking and a world where people cannot understand each other will be two bad consequences of this degeneration.

In reality, word usage and grammar have changed over the centuries, but this does not mean that the English language is degenerating. Shakespeare himself used slang and euphemisms, and used other words in ways that they are not used today. For instance, he used pneumonia to mean head cold, and nice to mean lewd. Grammatical rules have also changed over the centuries. The word the once had at least 15 different forms, depending upon where it appeared in a sentence. Modern English has not been damaged because there is now only one form of the, and it will not be damaged because the distinction between fewer and less is fading. Thus, yesterday's slang is today's standard English, and today's 'bas' grammar is tomorrow's acceptable English.

Without a doubt, changes in grammar, meaning, and usage will continue as long as people use the language. In the future, these changes could cause English to break up into several different languages; more likely, however, is that English will become almost universal as a worldwide second language. Regardless of which direction English takes, it will develop rather than degenerate.

Is English Degenerating?

Based on the text, please circle the letter of the best answer to each of the following questions.

1. Which statement best represents the author's point of view?
   a. English is in a constant state of change.
   b. English has changed for the worse since the 17th century.
   c. Shakespeare should have avoided the use of slang.
   d. None of the above.
2. Which statement would the author disagree with?
   a. English is in a constant state of change.
   b. English has always been an imperfect language.
   c. English has changed for the worse since the 17th century.
   d. Both (a) and (b).

3. Those who say that English is changing but not degenerating .......
   a. believe that Shakespeare is responsible for the change.
   b. Say that grammatical rules do not change without bad effects.
   c. Use the word pneumonia to mean head cold.
   d. Agree that word and grammatical rules have changed over time.

4. Which of the following statements is true?
   a. The word nice meant head cold.
   b. The words fewer and less were once used the same way.
   c. English has not changed since the 17th century.
   d. There is still some distinction between the words fewer and less.

5. Some people argue that the English language........
   a. Has degenerated.
   b. Has changed but not degenerated.
   c. Has neither changed nor degenerated.
   d. Both (a) and (b) are argued.

6. Which statement is true?
   a. English could become a world second language.
   b. English could break up into several languages.
   c. Both (a) and (b) are true.
   d. Both (a) and (b) are false.

7. People who say that English is degenerating.....
   a. Believe that slang and euphemisms are acceptable substitutes for standard English.
   b. Say that imprecise grammar causes English users to think less clearly.
   c. Believe that today's bad grammar is tomorrow's acceptable English.
   d. All of the above.
8. Since the 17th century......
   a. People have said that English is becoming sloppy and ungrammatical.
   b. English has changed little.
   c. English usage has become more precise.
   d. English has followed unchanging rules.

9. What is the author's position?
   a. English is degenerating.
   b. English is not degenerating.
   c. The author does not reveal a point of view.
   d. The author is neutral.

10. Which statement is true?
    a. Slang and euphemisms were not used until this century.
    b. Changes are taking place in English.
    c. English follows unchanging rules.
    d. None of the above.

The purport of these questions is informational content. The first two questions simply ask the reader to match items of information in the questions with parallels in the passage. Elsewhere we encounter expressions like "disagree", "the author's view", etc., but these are misleading. There is little on offer to measure the author's attitudes of the linguistic devices used to mark them. The central thesis of the text sets neutral observation of "Linguistic change" against the highly judgmental verdict of "degeneration". The author's bias (that change is not synonymous with degeneration) is given perfunctory recognition.

Narrative strands which reinforce the dominant contextual focus generally elude the question-net altogether. A reader could get all answers right and still be hazily aware of the core issue. Yet this type of question cannot be expected to achieve much more.

The completion exercises and the true/false statements guide the reader to look for the exact words and phrases in the text that are relevant to the uncompleted statement. They indirectly test the reader's knowledge of some vocabulary items since the answer can be entirely dependent on the meaning of those vocabulary items.
(e.g. question No.7 "substitute " is a key term in the question ). This makes EFL Students employ the ineffective strategy of reading word for word with a bilingual dictionary in hand instead of putting the emphasis on determining and identifying the meaning in a text. (Zamel, 1992). Of all questions on the passage, question number nine singles itself as a rather superficial test of the reader's awareness of the text type as well as of the writer's intention.

The use of multiple-questions, true/false statements and completion exercises are usually associated with expository prose texts. Perhaps this is due to the researcher's indifference to the text-type notion (i.e. expository, argumentative and instructional) (Werlich, 1983), as basic to reading which should be incorporated into the instruction of reading. This variable came to be taken into account only recently, following research carried out on writing -reading connections (Carrell and Connor, 1991). In brief, the techniques of the "retrospective" method (Block 1986:16) have been shown to be effective in measuring the reader's understanding of the thematic content of text looked at from a discrete point perspective.

**Written recalls of texts**

Perhaps the use of the written recalls of texts is a step in the right direction. This is because a written recall of a reading passage confronts the reader with the task of interacting with the text to grasp its dominant contextual focus and its multidimensionality at the same time. Written recalls involve the reader with a higher level of interaction and analysis than simple reporting on separate segments of meaning units in the text. Yet, recall protocols have been used by only EFL reading researchers. They have not been incorporated into EFL reading classroom procedures. Furthermore, while being adequate to grasp the macro-organizational patterns of texts such as problem solution, or comparison-contrast, recall protocols may miss on the micro-patterns within smaller units of the text such as marked or unmarked elements emphasized and within one utterance.

**The “introspective” method**

The “introspective” method exemplified by the “think-aloud” techniques (i.e. whereby the reader is asked to report verbally on what he was doing after reading separate sentences and whole paragraphs) seems to measure the reader's strategies of
reporting. They may not necessarily reveal what was going on inside the reader’s mind while and after reading. There could be a built-in danger in using this techniques since the verbal repertoire of the reader may influence the researcher’s judgment. However, the findings pertaining to the use of the “extensive mode” by readers referred to by Block (1986:482/3) as “integrators” who utilize previously acquired knowledge in reconstructing the text meaning is very interesting. The same goes for the other finding, the “non-integrators,” who used the “reflexive” mode by making their personal experiences and previous background knowledge the base of their reporting. They do that by adjusting the text information to their personal experience and previous background knowledge.

In conclusion, while the techniques adopted by EFL reading researchers must have contributed tremendously to the process-oriented descriptions of reading, their impact on EFL reading instruction has yet to be felt. Furthermore, these techniques have led instructors and student readers to perceive reading as the segmentation of text into meaning units only. The assumptions underlying the use of these techniques are tied up with a certain conception of literacy, the autonomous model of literacy (Street, 1984; Olson, 1977). A quote from Olson clarifies this autonomy of the printed page:

*Ideally the printed reader (i.e. a book to teach reading depends on no cues other than linguistic cues; it represents no intentions other than those chose represented in the text; it is addressed to no one in particular; its author is essentially anonymous; and its meaning is precisely that represented by the sentence meaning (Olson, 1977:276).*

The pragmatic dimension of reading as a process that requires maximal contribution by the reader in an attempt to regenerate or reconstruct the meaning seems to have been downplayed by the aforementioned research techniques. One final point about these techniques remains to be emphasized: the author is not against the format (i.e. the type of test questions) used by these researchers. He is only questioning the type of tasks and skills they test. A multiple-choice question, for instance, can be used to test the readers’ ability at recognizing relations between concepts in an argumentative text. In itself, a true/false statement or a multiple-choice
question is usually quite adequate, provided that it is administered and designed in reference to the type of skill to be tested.

**Translation and Back Translation in the EFL Reading class**

This section proposes using translation from L2 into L1 and a back translation from the translational versions in L1 into L2. The proposal to use translation and back translation exercises in the EFL reading class is not to be understood as an alternative to the other techniques in use. Rather, the use of translation and back translation is meant as a supplementary activity to those techniques. It will be shown later that translation and back translation exercises can engage the EFL student readers, say Arab EFL learners, in efficient ways of interacting with the text and can guide them to employing strategies of text-processing at the micro-and macro-levels. This type of classroom activity enables student readers to approach the reading text as an act of communication embedded in the social reality of the reader and the writer.

The use of translation and back translation as FEL reading classroom activities is supported on the following grounds:

1. Text-processing at the micro-level which means the recognition and production of semantic/pragmatic relations and the linguistic devices (i.e. lexico-grammatical) used to realize them in the L2 reading text is at the heart of the reading process.
2. A comparison and contrast between the student reader’s translation into L1 and the source text (L2 reading passage) may grasp the variance in the linguistic devices in L1 and L2.
3. Pedagogically, the call for an explicit teaching of top-level organizational patterns of expository texts in an EFL reading class (Carrell, 1991) can best be realized if done on the basis of contrastive textual analysis. A back translation exercise can be effective for guiding students to see points of similarities and differences between the two language systems at the linguistic, rhetorical and sociocultural levels.

All in all, the use of translation and back translation exercises in the EFL reading classroom is based on a pragmatic conception of literacy. A conception that perceives the written text as an act of communication in which the writer is motivated to have a dominant contextual focus. This is accomplished by observing the sociocultural norms for language use in his community. The reader, at the other end, has to
utilize all linguistic and non-linguistic cues to realize the writer's dominant contextual focus in a text despite its multidimensionality. A translation of the L2 text often confronts the translator with the task of interacting with the L2 (source text) to dismantle its linguistic/pragmatic complexity. It should be stressed that teaching on the basis of models in the same language may not be as effective as allowing the learner first to perform and then contrasting his performance with the model.

How Translation and Back Translation can supplement other Techniques in EFL reading

The use of translation and back translation exercises can be used to sensitize student readers to micro-text processing. This is one dimension of the reading process which other EFL reading techniques such as multiple-choice questions, sentence completion exercises, true/false statements and even the written recall protocols may not characterize. The type of micro-text processing referred to here involves the following: an understanding of the concatenation of given/new information (or theme/rheme order); an awareness of marked and unmarked thematic elements within a stretch of discourse; an understanding of the writer's involvement and/or detachment exhibited across the text; last but not least, the hierarchical structure of semantic/pragmatic relations within a small unit of the reading passage such as a paragraph with embeddings and embeddedness.

In the following section, the author presents samples of the translations and back translations of a text given to a class of Arab EFL learners at the intermediate level at King Saud University, Saudi Arabia. The text exhibits embedded participial clauses, phrases, compound predicate phrases, etc. The students were asked to translate the text into Arabic. Here is the text, followed by the type of contrastive textual analysis that EFL as reading instructor can carry out to assist his students to become aware of their flawed text-processing—the thing that other techniques due to their receptive nature may not accomplish.
Europe takes steps to avert currency crisis

London, Nov. 23 ( R )- Europe raised its defenses today against another currency convulsion, with Ireland, Spain and Norway all boosting interest rates to fight off speculators. (see also page 13)

But the fear of more upheaval in the European community’s exchange rate mechanism, realigned at the weekend for the third time in as many months, sent investors fleeing to the U.S. dollar as a haven of relative safety for their funds.

“The market’s sure there’s more devaluations and rate moves to come yet in Europe and that makes the dollar look like a haven of peace and stability,” s U.S. bank dealer in London said. The dollar was trading at 1.6050 German marks and 124.08 Japanese yen around midsession, compared with Friday’s close of 1.5910 marks and 123.68 Japanese yen.

A six percent devaluation of Iberian currencies in an emergency ERM protection maneuver took some of the heat off the Spanish peseta and the Portuguese escudo, which held their own in morning trading today, but pushed the Irish punt and weaker Scandinavian currencies into the firing line. Economists expressed doubt about whether the devaluations would be enough to stave off a crisis, and said another big attack by speculators on the ERM could blow the system apart, sending shock waves through other currencies and economies.

The turmoil has spilled over to currencies outside the grid, forcing Sweden to float its crown free of the European currency unlit last week and Norway to hoist its money rates today.

The Irish government led the defense against a threatened assault by currency speculators who have been stalking weak spots in the grid since the “black Wednesday” offensive forced the hasty exit of sterling and the Italian lira two months ago.

Spain’s key money rate was tightened by three-quarters of a percentage point to 13.75 percent and dealers said Portugal’s central bank had intervened in money markets to support the escudo’s value. “So far so good,” said one Paris currency dealer.  

(underlining mine) (Arab News, Nov. 24, 1992)
Translation and Back Translations of the Reading text

Several students rendered the underlined clause in paragraph one:

“...With Ireland, Spain and Norway all boosting interest to fight off speculators....”

as another separate idea realized by a coordinated clause instead of keeping it as an amplification of the preceding statement (Crombie, 1985) or as a supporting statement of the preceding one.

The following is a back translation (from Arabic, L1 into English, L2).

“Europe took steps today defend itself against another monetary convulsion. This took place when of all Ireland, Norway and Spain raised their interest rates to fight off spectators....”

(underlining mine),

Obviously, this is not the same as in the original:

“Europe raised its defenses today against another currency convulsion, with Ireland, Spain and Norway all boosting interest rates to fight off speculators”


The back translation can be used to demonstrate to student readers or translator trainees how they misconstrued the relation between the “general” and the “specific” aspects of one basic idea (defense against conclusion). The “general” being Europe’s defense and the “specific” Irish, Spanish and Norwegian interest rates. Furthermore, the back translation shows a first thesis followed by another thesis, emphasizing the temporal reference:

“...This took place when all of Ireland, Norway and Spain raised their interest rates to fight off speculators”.

Here is another back translation from Arabic into English to be compared and contrasted with the original:

“Ireland and Spain have increased today the interest rates on their currencies in an attempt to limit the activity of speculators and this is a step
towards what Europe considers its raising defenses against currency convulsions”,

Utilizing back translation such as the above enables the translator trainer or EFL instructor to guide their trainees to realize the following: the translator trainee (Student reader) ended up reversing the thematic progression of the paragraph in the original. This back translation makes the supporting statement or the amplification of the main thesis:

“..With Ireland, Spain and Norway all boosting interest rates ..”

the main thesis. It is then followed by a reason, “… in an attempt to…” and then a comment, functioning as an after-thought,” … and this is a step … convulsion”.

Here is a back translation of paragraph two of the reading passage:

”… But the fear of an upheaval in exchange rates in the other European countries as is happening now at the weekend for the third time for several months, due to some investors, moving to the dollar as a cover for their currencies due to the existence of European currency devaluation...”

The original is:

“But the fear of more upheaval in the European community’s exchange rate mechanism. Realigned at the weekend for the third time in as many months, sent investors fleeing to the U.S. dollar as a haven if relative safety for their funds”. (underlining mine)

It is enough to state the back-translation of the student reader’s translation version of the original shows how he misconstrued the modificational element, “… realigned at the weekend …. Months, …” and rendered it as a result to the reason, “due to the investors” moving to the U.S. dollar as a cover...”. This last reason is actually a result in the original caused by the “fear of more upheavals…”.

Discussion
The pattern that emerges as a result of the sample of Arab EFL reader's interaction with the ST (the reading passage) and subsequently their rendering of it in Arabic can be characterized as follows:

1. These student readers tend to misconstrue the semantic relations realized by the lexico-grammatical structures embedded or subordinated within a short segment of the text such as a paragraph. Specifically, the subordinated ideas were misjudged in terms of their contribution to the communicative dynamism of the text as to whether they were being used as an amplification of a statement, an amplification of a preceding element in a complex sentence, or the reason / result of the preceding or following structures.

2. The pattern reveals a tendency to turn a subordinated / embedded idea in the original to a coordinated one equal in weight and rank to the preceding main idea.

Although the need for teaching the top-level organizational patterns of expository texts has been called for previously (Carrel 1985), the way to go about that in an EFL reading class is by resort to translation and back-translation exercises. To bring models into the classroom and analyze them with the student as models to be imitated may not yield good results. Confronting the student readers with the mismatch between their flawed performance and the model, achieved through the use of translation exercises can be very effective in raising the students’ awareness of their micro-text processing.

The use of multiple-choice questions, true / false statements or the “think-aloud” protocols may have revealed certain aspects of the reading process, but their impact on reading pedagogy has either been slight or even misleading. They should be utilized in a way where students and instructors alike don’t get the wrong idea that reading is a static process rather than an active one.
1. This is what is referred to in Hatim’s and Mason’ (1990), *Discourse and the Translator*, as the “situation managing” which means that the dominant function of the text is to manage or steer the situation in a manner favorable to the text producer’s goals. This “situation managing” (borrowed from Beaugrande and Dressler, 1981) is the focus of argumentation. This is contrasted with “mentioning of a situation” typical of exposition, where the focus is on providing a reasonably detached account, Hatim and Mason (1990) add the topic sentence in argumentation “sets the tone” and must be substantiated while in exposition, the topic sentence “sets the scene” and must be expounded.

2. The questions on the reading passage cannot grasp the text type focus nor the “tone setters” or “scene-setters”.

NOTES
References


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