The Effect of Translation as a Noticing Strategy on Learning Complex Grammatical Structures by EFL Learners

 Hassan Soleimani,[1]
 Hoora Heidarikia[2]

[1]Associate Professor at Payame Noor University, *Iran*

[2]MA in TEFL, Payame Noor University, *Iran*

ABSTRACT

Translation practice as a cognitive strategy to notice the gap between what learners know and what they do not might contribute to the acquisition of grammatical structures in a language learning. The present study investigated the effect of literal translation as a noticing technique on learning the participial phrases and absolute constructions in English. Forty EFL students were non-randomly selected based on the enrollment procedures of their university. A pre-test was administered to check participant's knowledge of targeted structures prior to the study. Translating 10 participial phrases and absolute constructions from English language into Persian while thinking aloud before deductive instruction was the treatment in the experimental group, and deductive instruction of targeted structures with exercises was applied to the control group for several sessions. Running related parametric statistics, the results revealed that the use of translation significantly affected participants' noticing and learning the targeted grammatical structures. The implications for learners, teachers, and material developers will be explained.

Keywords: Noticing; translation; participial phrases; absolute constructions.

Corresponding Author: Hassan Soleimani; Payame Noor University, Iran

e-mail: hsoleimanis@pnu.ac.ir

1. Introduction

There is a general consensus that language learning without "noticing" the gap in the interlanguage system on the part of language learners is hard to happen, and to many second language researchers, noticing is considered as a prerequisite to learn (Ellis, 1995; Robinson, 1995; Schmidt, 1990, 1995, 2001; Schmidt & Frota, 1986). Schmidt's main point was that noticing something in the input is crucial to acquisition, and once the learner notices something in the input, it automatically becomes intake. According to Schmidt, "noticing' is a prerequisite for the comprehension, processing, and eventual integration of new grammatical knowledge in language acquisition process. Noticing by definition involves awareness and consciousness. Thus, noticing includes awareness, and awareness presupposes attention. Hence, attention is central to any concept of noticing (as cited in Seong, 2009). Some researchers have developed models to rationalize the use of L1 in learning L2, including the multilingual competence model (Castellotti, 2005; Cook, 2001, 2005) where the theoretical assumptions have been applied in L2 classroom.

Translation is still a challenging topic among language teaching researchers, methodologists, and psycholinguists. The application of translation as a pedagogical tool has been studied and practiced; nevertheless, the application of translation to as a cognitive prompt to help learners' "noticing" has not been investigated galore. In the literature of language teaching and learning, translation has been advocated by some researchers as a learning method. It has been stated that translation can practiced in the classroom to develop language learners' interlanguage system. Perkin (1985) argues translation in the classroom might facilitate students' "linguistics awareness" of the contrast between first language and second language grammatical structures.

The use of first language or mother tongue (L1) in ELT classrooms has always been a controversial issue. In fact, different theories of second language (L2) acquisition have been put forward about the value of L1 use in L2 classes. Some researchers have argued that the use of L1 in the classroom might be effective in the sense that it may facilitate L2 acquisition (Cook, 2007; Levine, 2003; Macaro, 2001; Schweers, 1999); however, some other researches have expressed ideas against the use of L1(Harmer, 2001, Prodromoue, 2002). Advocates of the monolingual approach have suggested that the target language should be the only medium of communication.

Polio and Duff (1994) claimed that the use of L1 in the classroom conflicts with Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories. Pan and Pan (2012) argue that since translation involves the use of two languages, it deprives students of opportunities to receive sufficient FL input. Translation tasks have nothing to do with the way in which a mother language is learnt. So, the idea is that they do not promote natural FL learning (Sankey, 1991). Many teachers have criticized the monolingual approach. Nation (2003) believes that the use of L2 may cause embarrassment for some language learners. In other words, many shy learners and those who feel they are not good at the L2 may suffer from the exclusive use of L2 in the classroom.

According to Ellis (2008), "the effects of the L1 are very evident in L2 acquisition" (p. 470). As Duff (1989) states, "translation happens everywhere, all the time, so why not in the classroom?" (p. 155). According to Atkinson (1987), one of the reasons for lack of attention to the use of students' native language could be the association of translation with grammar translation method. Widdowson (2003) and Cook (2007) have stated that learners naturally translate between L1 and Second Language (SL), and asking learners to translate in class embraces this natural tendency. Schmidt (2001) stated that when learners translate wrongly or in an inappropriate way, they at least notice that something needs adjustment even if they cannot see exactly what is missing. In fact, based on Schmidt (1990, 2001), " input does not become intake for language learning until it is noticed" (as cited in Schmidt, 2010, p. 724).

The idea is that paying attention and becoming aware of what is to be learned in the input is a crucial point of noticing hypothesis. It means that people learn about the things that they pay attention to. The literature reveals a controversy over the idea of including translation (Duff, 1989; Widdowson, 2003; Cook, 2007, Leonardi, 2010; Machida, 2011) or banning translation (Fernández-Guerra, 2014; Pan & Pan, 2012; Sankey, 1991) in language learning classrooms. There is another gap in this regard which appears to be vital in relation with the present discussion. In fact, many language teachers may have ignored the role of translation in language teaching (Chamot & O'Malley, 1987; Cook, 2001). Even in the case of including translation in language learning classrooms, many teachers might not be aware of the psychological benefits of translation in language learning. So, identifying the psychological benefits of translation seems to play an influential role in introducing the use of translation as an effective strategy in language learning. In addition to the points mentioned, many teachers might not be aware of the technique for the use of translation as a teaching methodology. In other words, today's translation activities are different. They have little to do with the previous method which occurred in a non-interactive teacher-centered classroom with few activities aside from the translation of difficult, non-relevant, and often boring texts (Owen, 2003). Moreover, not many studies so far have devoted attention to such psychological aspect in language learning. Thus, based on the previously discussed researches, two research questions and hypotheses are addressed in the present study to shed some light on these problems and fill the gaps mentioned. The first question is to investigate whether the use of literal translation from English into Persian will affect learners' noticing the participial phrases and

absolute constructions. The second is to investigate whether the use of translation as a strategy of noticing will result in the learning of targeted complex grammatical structures. So, the present study attempts to test two hypotheses accordingly. The first is regarding the effect of using translation as a strategy on the process of noticing itself. Therefore, the hypothesis is to examine whether the use of translation from English into Persian will statistically affect EFL learners' noticing the participial phrases and absolute constructions. Finally, the second attempts to indicate the role of translation as a noticing strategy on learning. Therefore, the second attempts to examine whether the use of translation as a strategy of noticing will statistically affect learning of targeted complex grammatical structures.

2. Literature Review

There are some recent studies explicitly proposing different types of Translation in Language Teaching (TILT). For example, Cook (2010) offeres specific suggestions for teachers who do not share students' native languages; and Carreres and Noriega Sánchez (2011) propose some sample translation-based tasks. Many studies have been conducted regarding students' opinions upon the use of translation (Brooks-Lewis, 2009; Carreres, 2006, as cited in in Fernández-Guerra, 2014; Kavaliauskienë & Kaminskienë, 2007; Liao, 2006, and Rolin-Ianziti & Varshney, 2008 as cited in Fernández-Guerra, 2014). Carreres's (2006, as cited in Fernández-Guerra, 2014), may be considered a pioneer in the analysis of TILT student's opinion. She conducted a questionnaire among 31 second and third year students of modern languages at the University of Cambridge.All respondents agreed that translation should be taught in a modern language degree, and most of them believed that translation into the FL was a very useful language learning device, especially when learning vocabulary.

Liao's study (2006) explored the role of translation in Taiwanese EFL learners in terms of their learning beliefs about using translation and their main learning strategies. Students showed a medium to high level use of translation as a learning strategy. Kavaliauskienë and Kaminskienë (2007) also carried out a survey of students' perceptions of the amount of mother tongue they needed and mental translation they used in learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Their findings suggested that all learners appeared to rely on their mother tongue in learning ESP, and that the amount of native language needed had a lot to do with their proficiency level and linguistic situations. Rolin-Ianziti and Varshney (2008, as cited in Fernández-Guerra, 2014) analyzed the functions that beginner learners of French in an Australian university attributed to their native language. They found that it had a positive affective role, since it may alleviate classroom anxiety.

Brooks-Lewis (2009) reported learners' positive attitudes towards the use of their native language in the FL classroom in Mexico. Ciaflone (2009) conducted a research on the use of L1 in English courses at the University of Messina in Italy. He found that the interviewed students and teachers seem favorable to the use of L1 in terms of explanation of grammar, vocabulary items, difficult concepts, and for general comprehension. He also concluded that students seem to prefer the use of L1 and teachers subscribe to using L1 judiciously. It seems that language learners use translation as a learning strategy for the purpose of comprehension, remembering, and production of foreign language. Bagheri and Fazel (2011) explored the use of translation by Iranian university students, particularly with regard to their beliefs concerning translation and using it as a strategy in writing. The participants were 40 female and male students at Shiraz Azad University. An interviewing guide and two questionnaires were used in the study: the Inventory for Beliefs about Translation (IBI), and the Inventory for Translation as a Learning Strategy (ITLS). The result indicated that translation facilitated the acquisition of English writing skills. Karimian and Talebinejad (2013) investigated Iranian English learners' use of translation as a learning strategy to learn English. The study employed quantitative and supplemental qualitative methods. For the quantitative part, 170 Iranian EFL learners answered the ITLS questionnaire. For the qualitative survey, 120 students responded the learners' interview guide. Then, the result indicated that language learners used a wide variety of learning strategies concerning translation for the purpose of comprehending and remembering as well as producing English.

Alrefaai (2013) showed that teachers are divided over this issue of using or not using translation

in teaching and learning context. As such a study indicated, there is a slight inclination towards not using translation. The result of the study showed that around 42% of the teachers think that the use of translation in teaching and learning context of foreign language learning is useful. According to what mentioned, around 58% of teachers opposed this idea. At the end of study, he concluded that translation has an important role to play in language learning and teaching. Fernández Guerra (2014) conducted a study that involved a total of 62 degrees in English studies and 93 students of a degree in computer science with a lower proficiency level and different objectives. When the researcher asked students' opinion on several activity types that normally take place in the classroom, they ranked translation tasks as the most motivating activities. They also believed that translation tasks could be more effective in FL acquisition, alongside listening and/ or watching activities and speaking activities. Relatively little research attention so far seems to have been devoted to consideration of the use of translation in learning grammatical structures.

Ghaiyoomian and Zarei (2015) conducted a study to examine the effect of using translation from L1 to L2 on the improvement of EFL learners' language accuracy. Participants were 62 students in grade three of junior high school in Isfahan. The experimental group received grammar exercises in translating some phrases and sentences from Persian to English related to the intended grammatical structures of the study. The control group just did their textbook exercises. The result showed that the treatment had a considerable effect on language accuracy of the students. Atkinson (1987) clearly states that translation to the target language which emphasizes a newly taught language item could be considered as a means to reinforce structural, conceptual, and sociolinguistic differences between two languages. He believes that even though this activity could not be communicative, it attempts to improve accuracy of newly learned structures.

Chellapan (1982) argues that the use of translation involves a conscious process of learning. The idea is that by the use of translation, learners can be aware of the distinctiveness of similar structures in the two languages. They also can be aware of the different processes used in conveying the same massage. Shiyab and Abdullateef (2001) argued that translation can be used in language teaching because it can utilized as a method of comparing and contrasting between two languages. If students use their mother tongue and notice the similarities and differences between the two languages, grammar learning becomes less frightening. Ellis (1996) suggested that grammar teaching can enhance learners' proficiency and accuracy and assist them to acquire the syntactic system of language. Learning English grammatical structures has always been a great challenge for Iranian EFL learners.

To our knowledge, no research so far has devoted attention to the use of translation as a strategy of noticing complex grammatical structures. Although some researchers have put forward the use of language learning strategies in general and cognitive strategies in particular to improve learners' interlanguage system, the specific role translation into the second language plays in noticing the structure has not been deeply examined in the literature. Then, to bridge the gap, the present study intends to examine if translation might be considered as a strategy of noticing for the purpose of learning English complex grammatical structures. To this end, the following hypotheses were formulated:

Null Hypothesis 1: The use of translation from English into Persian has no significant effect on EFL learners' noticing the participial phrases and absolute constructions

Null Hypothesis 2: The use of translation as a strategy of noticing has no significant effect on learning of targeted complex grammatical structures.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants of the present study, sampled randomly, were 40 EFL students at a university in Iran in the academic year 2017. The participants were 11 male students and 29 female students. They were between 19 and 29 years old with a mean age of 24 years, and assigned into two experimental and control groups. All of the participants were Persian native speakers studying EFL, and all were first year students taking part in an obligatory Grammar 2 course. The placement

of the participants into the classes was based on the enrollment procedures of the university and students' passing the obligatory Grammar 1 course. Since the proficiency level of students was not considered vital in this study, only a pre-test was administered for the purpose of examining the students' prior knowledge of targeted structures.

3.2. Materials

The teaching materials used in the current study were 10 English sentences to be translated into Persian and a grammar book entitled Modern English part II: Sentences and complex structures by Frank (1972). Two chapters of the book were used as teaching content of the targeted grammatical structures: Chapter five was used as the teaching content for participial phrases, and chapter eight for teaching absolute constructions. It is worth mentioning that the sentences contained the targeted structures of the current study, and the students were to translate the sentences while thinking aloud. Moreover, two testing materials of pre-test, post-test, and an online technique of think aloud were used in the present study. The tests were parallel tests and they were piloted. They were given to a sample similar to the target population. In fact, 10 students participated for the purpose of piloting the tests. Then, the reliability of the tests was checked using KR-21 method. The reliability of the pre-test was 0.80 and the reliability of the post-test was 0.70.

3.3. Procedure

First of all, the participants of both groups were administered a pre-test to examine the participants' prior knowledge of targeted structures. The procedure continued for about four sessions: Two sessions were devoted to the pre-test and post-test administration, and two sessions were devoted to the treatment for the experimental group and placebo for the control group. As the treatment, the participants were given 10 English sentences that contained the targeted structures of the study to be translated into Persian while thinking aloud. Thinking aloud was emphasized and related directions were given accordingly as an online technique for noticing. It should be mentioned that this part of the procedure was applied out of the Grammar 2 class time. So, the participants translated the sentences while thinking aloud and one of the researchers recorded their voices for the purpose of testing and indicating noticing the targeted structures (verbal structures). The time for translating the sentences was ranged from 10 to 20 minutes. In fact, the point which is significant to be reported in this regard is that we predicted that 30 minutes would be enough for translating the sentences, but there were different ranges for translating the sentences. For example, the first sentence to be translated was:

1. The girl talking to the teacher is very intelligent.

[1]Subject 1

[2]Subject 2

Since the present study was delimited to noticing and learning of the targeted grammatical structures, the participants were allowed to use dictionary for the purpose of finding the meaning of some unknown words, they also asked some of the unknown words from the researchers. In fact, this part was considered as the examining procedure of noticing prior to instruction. Then, their instructor taught the participial phrases, and one of the researchers taught absolute constructions in two sessions, and the absolute constructions were not included in the syllabus of the course. Moreover, the time duration for each session was around 90 minutes. In fact, the absolute constructions were taught in around 30 minutes of the second session.

Both the instructor and the researcher used the deductive way of instruction and explained the rules in details. Then, in the next session, the participants were given a post-test. For the control group, participial phrases were taught by the instructor and absolute constructions were taught by the researcher. Since absolute constructions were not included in the syllabus of the course, the researcher taught these structures in around 30 minutes of the second session. It is worth mentioning that for the control group, the focus was on teaching the targeted structures deductively. The idea is that both the instructor and the researcher explained the rules in details, and then they used some examples of the course book to clarify the points. After the deductive instruction, the participants were to work on the examples and exercises of the course book in the

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the Pre-test of experimental and control group

Groups	N	M	SD	SEM
Pretest				
Experimental	20	13.85	1.13	.25
Control	20	13.55	1.14	.25

Table 2. Results of the independent samples T-Test between the Pre-Test scores of experimental and control group

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for equality of means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. error difference	95% Confidence interval of the difference	
								Lower	Upper
Pretest									
Equal variances assumed	.11	.73	.83	38	.41	.30	.36	-.43	1.03
Equal variances not assumed			.83	37.99	.41	.30	.36	-.43	1.03

Table 3. Paired samples statistics of the pre-test and post-test of experimental group

	M	N	SD	SEM
Pair 1				
Pretest of experimental group	13.85	20	1.22	.27
Posttest of experimental group	19.10	20	1.29	.28

class. In addition to doing the exercises in the class, they were given homework. So, two sessions were devoted to this procedure.

To examine the research hypotheses, the data were collected using pre-test and post-test. It is worth mentioning that the same tests were used for both groups. In each test, there were 30 multiple-choice questions. The time of answering the tests was 30 minutes for both groups and one point was assigned for each correct answer for the purpose of scoring. So, the tests were scored out of 30. Then, the data were analyzed statistically by the use of SPSS version 20. First of all, normality of the collected data was examined, and since the distribution of data was normal, parametric statistics was used to test the research hypotheses.

4. Results

As shown in Table 1, the mean scores of experimental and control groups are nearly the same, indicating equality of two groups regarding their knowledge of targeted structures.

As Table 2 shows, the Sig value of Levene's for Equality of Variances equals .73 which is larger than .05. The obtained results revealed that equal variances were assumed and the value of sig. (2 tailed) = .41> .05. Therefore, no statistically significant difference was found between the mean scores of two groups on the pre-test. So, both groups were equal in terms of their knowledge of targeted structures of the present study.

Null Hypothesis 1: The use of translation from English into Persian has no statistically significant effect on EFL learners' noticing the participial phrases and absolute constructions.

According to Table 3, the mean score of post-test of experimental group (M= 19.10) exceeded the mean score of pre-test (M=13.85) of the same group.

According to Table 4, the obtained Sig (2 tailed) =.000 < .05. Such a result indicated a significant difference between mean scores from pre-test to post-test of the experimental group. Thus,

Table 4. Results of the paired samples T-Test between the pre-test and post-test scores of experimental group

	Paired differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
	Mean	Std. deviation	Std. error mean	95% Confidence interval of the difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pair 1								
Pretest of experimental group - Posttest of experimental group	-5.25	.96	.21	-5.70	-4.79	-24.29	19	.00

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of the post-test of experimental and control group

Groups	N	M	SD	SEM
Posttest				
Experimental	20	19.10	1.29	.28
Control	20	16.70	2.02	.45

Table 6. Results of the independent samples t-test between the post-test scores of experimental and control group

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for equality of means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference	Std. error difference	95% Confidence interval of the difference	
								Lower	Upper
Posttest									
Equal variances assumed	1.91	.17	4.46	38	.00	2.40	.53	1.31	3.48
Equal variances not assumed			4.46	32.26	.00	2.40	.53	1.30	3.49

according to the interpretation mentioned, the null hypothesis was rejected. In other words, the idea concerning the above mentioned null hypothesis is that the use of translation had statistically significant effect on noticing the targeted structures by the learners.

Null Hypothesis 2: The use of translation as a strategy of noticing has no statistically significant effect on learning of targeted complex grammatical structures.

As Table 5 shows, the mean of experimental group (M= 19.10) exceeded the control group's mean (M= 16.70) on the post-test.

As shown in Table 6, the Sig of Levene's Test for Equality of Variances equals .17 > .05. So, the first row was used for testing the current null hypothesis. Thus, equal variances were assumed and the Sig. (2 tailed) = .000 <.05, indicating a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental and control group on the post-test. The idea is that the use of translation as a strategy of noticing had a statistically significant effect on learning of targeted grammatical structures. Based on the interpretation clarified, the researcher rejected the above mentioned null hypothesis.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The main purpose behind conducting this study was to examine the effect of using translation (literal translation that is limited to one sentence) as a strategy of noticing the participial phrases

and absolute constructions by EFL learners. To this end, the participants were divided into two groups of experimental and control group, and their homogeneity was ensured statistically. The prediction regarding the first hypothesis was that the use of translation might affect learners' noticing the targeted structures. Running related statistics revealed a statistically significant difference between two mean scores indicating the dramatic effect of translation on learners' noticing the targeted complex grammatical structures. It might be argued that such a significant effect was due to the treatment of the study (the use of translation while thinking aloud). It is worth mentioning that the participants made some changes in translation of the structures for the purpose of finding an appropriate Persian equivalent.

This finding corresponded with Harmer (2001, as cited in Kavaliauskienë, 2009) argumentation regarding the use of native language. He stated that the use of native language allows learners to search for a correspondence for English structures in L1, which does not always exist and non-parallel nature of language cause learners to think comparatively. Finding of the present study also corresponded with Schmidt (2001) argumentation regarding the use of translation. He argued that when the learners translate wrongly or inappropriately, they at least notice some connections need adjustment even if they cannot see exactly what is missing or needs adjustment. Another significant point to be mentioned concerning this study is that online techniques collect the data while subjects are doing the task and think- aloud protocols are common example in this regard (e.g., Alanen, 1995; Jourdenais, Ota, Stauffer, Boyson, & Doughty 1995 as cited in Pütz & Sicola, 2010; Lew, 1997, as cited in Pütz & Sicola, 2010, 2000 as cited in Pütz & Sicola, 2010; Rosa & Leow, as cited in Pütz & Sicola, 2010).

The assumption made by the second hypothesis was that the use of translation as a strategy of noticing would significantly affect learning of targeted complex grammatical structures. To test the claim, applying independent samples t-test, the results revealed a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of two groups confirming significant effect of translation as a strategy of noticing on learning the targeted grammatical structures. Based on the literature review, to the researchers' knowledge, no research so far has been conducted to examine the effect of translation on noticing and learning of English complex grammatical structures. For this reason, it might be concluded that this finding was partially consistent with the findings of some studies which only investigated the effect of translation on learning English grammatical structures.

As was mentioned, Vaezi and Mirzaei (2007) investigated the effect of using translation from L1 to L2 on the improvement of EFL learners' language accuracy. They concluded that the use of translation was very effective in grammar learning, but they did not investigate the effect of translation as a strategy of noticing. So, the finding of the present study generally was consistent with the study made by Vaezi and Mirzaei (2007) concerning effectiveness of using translation in learning English grammatical structures. The same idea is true for the study made by Ghaiyoomian and Zarei (2015) who also investigated the effect of using translation from L1 to L2 on the improvement of EFL learners' language accuracy.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that care must be taken in generalization of the research results. In addition, there was a time limitation regarding translating the sentences while thinking aloud, number of sentences to be translated, number of sessions, and presenting the sentences of each structure. Therefore, modifications regarding generalizability is suggested for further research: doing the study with more students with randomization and more sentences for translation. In addition, increasing the time of translation, increasing the number of sessions, and presenting the sentences of each structure to be translated in longer time periods are also suggested for the purpose of providing more valuable results and conclusions. Finally, the use of translation as a strategy of noticing could be an effective suggestion for learning other structures and vocabulary learning.

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Endnotes

[1]Subject 1

Think-aloud: اون دختر... با معلم صحبت ميكنه... خيلى باهوشه.

Translation: آن دختر با معلم صحبت ميكند و خيلى باهوش است

[2]Subject 2

Think aloud: دختر... ميگه به معلمش كه خيلى... باهوشه.

Translation: دختر به معلمش ميگويد كه خيلى باهوش است