

Language Ability or Translation Ability: The Role and Status of Translation in Iranian Official ESP Textbooks*

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Abstract

Translation is a widely appreciated tool in foreign language teaching; however, its role is surrounded by continuing controversy. Translation as a key teaching and learning tool first came into use in Grammar translation method. However, its use has been frowned upon disapprovingly in the subsequent language teaching methods and approaches. In spite of perpetual debates over the use of translation in teaching English for general purposes, it is commonly used in teaching English for specific purposes (ESP) context. However, the issues concerning the role and status of translation in ESP textbooks published by Iran's Organization for Researching and Composing University Textbooks in the Humanities (known as SAMT in Iran) have not been sufficiently elucidated. Therefore, this study aimed at examining the role and status of translation in Iranian official ESP textbooks. To this end, using a checklist developed by the current researchers, translation activities in 30 sampled textbooks were examined in order to see whether they were intended to serve developing, more, language ability or teaching translation ability. Further, the frequency and space allocation of translation activities were scrutinized. The results suggested that there are variations in terms of both frequency and space allocation of translation activities in ESP textbooks. Moreover, translation activities are at the service of teaching language ability in SAMT ESP textbooks to larger extent.

Keywords:

ESP official textbooks, translation ability, language ability, Translation activities.

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Date of acceptance : Feb. 2014

1. Introduction

The use of translation in teaching English dates back to the emergence of Grammar Translation Method (GTM), which was based on using the first language to gain a comprehensive understanding of the reading passages. As the name of GTM suggests, translation is the cornerstone in this approach in teaching foreign languages. By means of translation, language students grasp the meaning of vocabularies and understand the grammatical structures when they translate sentences. However, with the advent of subsequent approaches to teaching English including direct method, Audio Lingualism, and communicative language teaching, the attitudes of foreign language specialists and teachers towards the role of translation changed.

In the more newly developed approaches to teaching and learning English, translation was abandoned, because it was considered as an obstacle in progression of learning and teaching a foreign language. Moreover, it was assumed that translation hindered language students from thinking in the target language and the language students resorting to translation mainly lacked fluency. In contradiction to this point of view, Zohrevandi (1992) held that “translation now deals with communicative needs and purposes for stretches of written or oral discourse [...] what Dell Hymes calls communicative competence” (p. 182). Another justification for using translation in teaching foreign language is removing the negative attitudes of students and reducing their anxiety about learning a foreign language (Stibbard, 1998).

Translation is playing multiple functions in teaching English. It could be applied as a means for teaching the language skills or, it can be taken into account as an end in itself. To put it simply, the students may either use translation as a medium in their language learning journey or they may simply attempt at becoming proficient translators (Klaudy, 2003).

According to Cook (2010), translation as a means can assist students in maximizing their confidence and accuracy and helps them with memorizing vocabularies and learning the structure of foreign language. He argues that “[l]earners will always relate the new language to their own, even if only in their own minds” (Cook, 2010, p. 49). Furthermore, translation is thought of as the fifth skill in learning a foreign language, which is acquired separately in the process of language learning and this reflects the function of translation as an end in itself.

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In spite of the long-standing controversy over the role of translation in teaching and learning English, translation is used as an indispensable tool in teaching ESP courses particularly in the context of Iran. As the students majoring at the higher levels of education have to obtain the knowledge of technical terms and expressions in their field of study, English for Specific Courses (ESP courses) are offered to them. Having taken a number of English courses at high school, Iranian students majoring at the higher levels of education normally have a background of English. However, this background knowledge of English is not strong enough to fulfill students' needs in the realm of ESP. Therefore, ESP teachers make use of different strategies and tactics to teach the courses and translation is one of the readily available tactics. Since translation as a tool deals with the native language and the foreign language at the same time, it can ease the training process and minimize the stress and negative perceptions of students. Furthermore, ESP teachers resort to their first language to elaborate on vague expressions and cater to a wide range of students who might have problems with comprehending the technical terms without translation.

According to Dudley-Evans and St John (1998), ESP as a material-led movement is an attempt at developing textbooks to fulfill the students' needs and the program's objective. In the context of Iran, ESP textbooks are published by the Organization for Research and Composing University Textbooks in the Humanities (SAMT). These textbooks contain a number of reading comprehension activities and translation activities to aid the learning of specified terms in their field of study.

To date numerous investigations (e.g. Davari, Erfani & Iranmehr, 2010; Ghalandari & Talebinejad; Rezvani & Amiri, 2012) have dealt with diverse aspects of ESP textbooks in Iran. Yet, to the best of our knowledge, a dearth of studies could be observed on the role and space allocation of translation activities in official ESP textbooks in Iran. Further, the question on the role of translation activities in ESP textbooks (either as a means to help translation ability (TA) or language ability (LA)), has remained yet unexplored. As such, the following research questions were more specifically addressed in this study:

1. What are the frequency and space allocation of translation activities in ESP textbooks?
2. What is the role of translation in ESP textbooks? Is it at the service of teaching language ability or translation ability?

2. Review of literature

Grammar translation method was the first and most remarkable approach to teaching a foreign language, which characterized the prominent role of translation in teaching a foreign language. Translation was employed to teach long lists of vocabularies and reading passages. However, in the subsequent approaches to teaching foreign languages the role of translation was notoriously degraded. Albeit the use of translation in teaching a foreign language has been under a long running debate, its persistent and salient place in teaching foreign languages is no secret to anyone. It is worthy of note that, the advantages and disadvantages of the use of translation in teaching a foreign language have been voiced repeatedly. Newson (1998) raises a number of arguments against using translation in teaching a foreign language: (a) Translation facilitates thinking and interference in one language, (b) It is regarded as an independent skill and (c) It does not encourage learner centered language learning. By contrast, Malmkjar (1998) argued that translating a foreign language is not an independent skill and it is integrated with other sub skills of language learning. It is also regarded as an interference controller.

Translation has been playing dual roles in teaching and learning a foreign language. It can either function as an invaluable tool to ease teaching a language or be perceived as an ultimate purpose. The literature indicates that the role of translation in teaching and learning a foreign language falls into two categories: translation as a tool to teach language ability or translation as an end in itself (Danchev, 1983; Duff, 1990; Gile,1995; Kluady,2003; Malmkjar,1998; Schäffner,1998).

In particular, translation is of great assistance in comparing the forms of at least two languages (Mahmoud, 2006). Moreover, grammar and vocabularies are acquired much more easily by means of translation (Carreres, 2006). In his study, Carreres (2006) conducted an investigation at the University of Cambridge on the attitudes of students towards using translation in learning a language. The findings of his study suggested that translation is one of the best ways for

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learning. Additionally, translation plays a crucial part in easing the comprehension of reading passages (Hsieh's, 2000).

Schäffner (1998) points to the differences between translation exercises in language teaching and teaching translation as a profession. In her view, the concept of translation in the two contexts needs to be defined differently: Translation for foreign language learning is reproducing the message of the source language while paying attention to different linguistic structures and it is called "decoding-encoding translation". On the contrary, translation as an ultimate end in itself deals with "text production for specific purposes".

As Lesznyák (2003) asserts translation is pedagogically playing two key roles: "illumination and memorization". However, Kluady (2003) stated that real translation is "only if the aim of translation is to develop translation skills" (p. 23). Pedagogical translation on the other hand is aimed at enhancing language proficiency. Thus, translation as a teaching means helps providing information about foreign language proficiency, and if it is intended to improve translational proficiency, then it is reflected as an end in itself (Kluady, 2003).

To translate a text skillfully, a translator needs to focus on the message to be translated, the reader of the text and the style of the text. Moreover, the findings of PACTE (2000) revealed that student should build translation competence to become successful translators.

Teaching and learning ESP mainly demand using first language because in ESP situations, the students are involved in learning a language which may not be used in their context (Tudor, 1987). Meanwhile, translation is of great assistance as far as accuracy, flexibility and clarity are concerned (Duff, 1990).

Translation is a highly acclaimed strategy to learn ESP (Hyland, 2006; Kavaliauskiene & Januleviciciene, 2002) and numerous studies lend support to the place of translation in teaching ESP courses. Tudor (1987) conducted an investigation on the role of translation in developing communicative activities in ESP teaching. The findings of his study revealed that translation facilitate acquiring the new language and communicative goals.

According to Saeidi and Jafari (2011), translation is used to raise consciousness about specific terminologies and ESP vocabularies. In their investigation, the effect of translation on memorizing vocabularies and consciousness rising was examined and the findings

indicated that translation has a significant impact on short-term retention of ESP vocabularies. Additionally, the results of another study conducted by Dikilitas and Calis (2012), verified the idea of the positive impact of translation on reading comprehension and vocabulary retention.

Teaching ESP courses in Iran is heavily organized on the use of translation and ESP teachers and students notably use it to learn more effectively. The use of translation in ESP context has been scrutinized from diverse perspectives. There has been little research, however, to explore the role and status of translation in Iranian official ESP textbooks. As such, this study is motivated by a dearth of research on the role of translation in official ESP textbooks in Iran.

3. Method

3.1 materials

Eight categories of ESP textbooks have been published by SAMT. From among the published books in these eight categories, thirty textbooks (see Appendix B for the book names sampled) were randomly selected. Each chapter of ESP textbooks generally contains a reading comprehension section, a language structure, and two translation activities. In the first translation activity, ESP students are required to translate an English passage into Farsi and for the second activity, students should find Persian equivalents for a list of English terminologies and expressions. More details on the number of pages in ESP categories, and the number of selected textbooks can be followed in Table 1.

Table 1. SAMT ESP textbook categories and the number of textbooks sampled

ESP categories	Total page no of sampled textbook	The no of selected textbooks
1. Medical science	1016	4
2. Social science I	778	4
3. Social science II	857	4
4. Human science I	918	3
5. Human science II	418	3
6. Pure science	985	4
7. Agriculture	588	3
8. Engineering	1212	5

4. Instrumentation

A twelve-item checklist (see Appendix A) was developed to examine the role of translation activities in sampled ESP textbooks. To be more specific, the checklist focused upon the features contributing to learning language ability or translation ability. The checklist consisted of six items addressing the role of translation as a means to enhance language ability (LA) and six items concerned the role of translation as a means to develop translation ability (TA). In developing the checklist, features of activities that help teaching/learning four language skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) and 2 sub skills (learning vocabulary and grammar) were derived based on the review of literature. Furthermore, the features of activities as a means to enhance translation ability were characterized in accordance with a model of translation ability posited by PACTE (2009). According to this model, translation ability is characterized in terms of five components of bilingual competence, strategic competence, instrumental competence, psycho-physiological competence, extra linguistic knowledge, and knowledge about translation. A brief delineation of the items was presented to the experts/raters to make sure that they interpret them as intended and formulated in the literature. All in all, twelve items were organized in the checklist to be rated from 1 to 6 to gain a more detailed comprehension of the raters' opinions on the role of translation activities in sampled ESP textbooks.

5. Procedure

To conduct the investigation, the researchers first randomly selected thirty ESP textbooks out of eight categories published by SAMT. Then the textbooks were analyzed to examine the space and frequency allocated to translation activities. In so doing, the researchers counted the total pages of all sampled textbooks and calculated the frequency and space allocated to translation activities in each ESP category. As for answering the question in terms of the role of translation activities, the researchers first scrutinized the introduction of ESP textbooks in search of the writers' explicit or implicit opinions about translation activities and then the checklist was distributed to two experts to examine the translation activities.

One of the experts holds PhD in teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) and the other has a master's in translations studies

and both of them have had the experience of teaching ESP courses. They had a meeting to share their understanding of the checklist. Then the raters rated independently the features of translation activities in sampled ESP textbooks from one to six. Finally, the researchers calculated the scores given to each item in two translation activities and obtained the mean.

6. Results

6.1 Space allocated to translation activities

Table 2 displays the findings of study concerning the space allocated to translation activities in sampled ESP textbooks. As it can be observed, in total, the largest space is allotted to translation activities in medical science category (14.85%) whereas the least space is allocated to translation activities (10%) in the category of human science 2. On the whole, minor variations were found in space allocation for translation activities in other categories of ESP textbooks.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics for space allocated (SA) to translation activities

ESP categories	Total page no	Pages allocated to translation activities	min	Mean	Max	SA %
1. Medical science	1016	142	22	33.5	45	14.85
2. Social science I	778	78	13	21.7	30	11
3. Social science II	857	99	18	25.3	32	11.5
4. Human science I	918	102	15	26.6	38	11.11
5. Human science II	418	41	11	20.6	30	10
6. Pure science	985	105	20	27	34	10.6
7. Agriculture	588	74	16	25.5	35	12.85
8. Engineering	1212	132	20	31.4	42	10.89

The minimum number of pages allocated to translation activities in each textbook of the categories is displayed in Table 3 and the maximum number of pages allocated to translation activities could be followed in Table 4.

Table 3. Minimum number of pages allocated to translation activities

ESP category	Textbook	Minimum page number
Medical science	Laboratory technology	22
Social science I	Social work	13
Social science II	Speech therapy	18
Human science I	Journal and media	15
Human science II	Persian literature	11
Pure science	Surveying	16
Engineering	Textile engineering	20
Agriculture	Horticulture	20

Table 4. Maximum number of pages allocated to translation activities

ESP category	Textbook	Minimum page number
Medical science	Pharmacology	45
Social science I	Social science	30
Social science II	Management	32
Human science I	Islamic science	38
Human science II	Visual arts	30
Pure science	Physics	34
Engineering	Industrial engineering	34
Agriculture	Plant protection	42

6.2 Frequency of translation activities

Table 3 shows the frequency of translation activities in ESP textbooks. The analyses shows minute variations in frequency (f) of translation activities in the sampled ESP textbooks ranging from 4.11 to 8 (see Table 5). Medical science category has the highest frequency in terms of translation activities (8%) whereas, the smallest frequency in terms

of translation activities is in the category of English for agriculture (4.11%). Quite similar to space allocation, variations of frequency of translation activities in most of ESP categories are not considerable.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics for Frequency of translation activities in ESP textbooks

ESP categories	Total no of activities	Translation activities	Frequency %
Medical science	2010	160	8
Social science I	1998	120	6
Social science II	1885	125	6.65
Human science I	1400	58	4.14
Human science II	2500	188	7.52
Pure culture	1900	150	7.9
Agriculture	1800	74	4.11
Engineering	2414	170	7.04

6.3 The role of translation activities in ESP official textbooks

To examine the role of translation activities, the researchers first checked the introduction of ESP textbooks. Only a few ESP textbook developers elaborated on the rationale to incorporate translation activities. In an attempt to gain a more comprehensive insight into the role of such activities in the sampled ESP textbook, two experts used checklist to rate the activities. In Table 6, the findings indicate that the total score of translation as a means to teach LA is greater than that of translation as a means to enhance TA. To put it more specifically, the total mean score of translation as a means to enhance LA for translation activity 1 and 2 are 20 and 11.5. Furthermore, as far as scores of features of translation as a means to enhance TA are concerned, translation activity 1 and 2 have a mean of 8.5 and 9.

As for the features of translation as a means to help LA, item two reading "this translation activity is intended to help students learn vocabulary" obtained the highest rating in both translation activity types. By contrast, item 12 stating, "this translation activity is intended to help students develop listening" obtained the lowest rating as

expected. Overall, Items related to translation as a means to teach translation ability gained lower scores.

Table 6. The results of the experts' checklist rating

Translation as a means to teach	Activity I	Activity II	Min	Mean	max	Total
LA	20	11.5	1	3.5	6	31.5
TA	8.5	9	1	3	5	17.5

7. Discussion

Translation activities along with other activities in ESP textbooks help students to learn about the academic language of their field of study. However, the role and space allocation of translation activities have not been clearly determined in ESP textbooks. The current study aimed at investigating the space allocation, frequency and the role of translation activities in ESP textbooks published by SAMT.

The findings of the study showed that few ESP textbook developers elaborate on the role and space allocation of translation activities in textbooks and no direct mention could be found in these regards. It might be presumed that ESP textbook developers take the issues of space allocation, frequency and role of translation activities for granted and do not bother to rationalize and justify translation activities. Further analyses also showed that there were variations in terms of both frequency and space allocation of translation activities in the sampled ESP textbooks. These variations could be due partially because of greater efforts to exerted in soft sciences to teach learners to acquire Persian equivalents for English words and phrases.

The other aim of this study was to examine the role of translation activities in the sampled ESP textbooks. In only a few ESP textbooks, textbook developers claimed that the first translation activity is designed to help learners practice translation ability and the second translation activity is intended to provide an opportunity to find appropriate Persian equivalents for English academic words. To obtain a more precise understanding, the experts rated the role of translation activities and their ratings suggested that translation activities in the sampled ESP textbooks are at the service of enhancing language ability (LA).

Seemingly, the impression of the experts in this study was different from ESP textbook developers about the role of translation activities. Yet, this finding is not far from the researchers' expectations because in ESP contexts most of students are not proficient enough and need to use their first language to learn the subject matter. Thus, translation

activities could contribute to learning language ability via maximizing vocabulary memorization, leaning grammatical structure and reading comprehension. This finding might also be justified on the ground that grammar translation method (GTM) is commonly practiced in Iran and most of ESP teachers favor this it. Given that in ESP contexts, learning specific vocabularies and understanding scientific texts are the major concerns in ESP contexts, GTM is more in line with the objectives of ESP courses and might help ESP teachers meet them.

A closer examination of the raters' scores indicated that the experts allocated higher scores to the first translation activity (translation of an English passage into Persian) suggesting that those activities would have a larger contribution to learning LA. This finding is in line with Dikilitas and Calis (2012), and Saeidi and Jafari (2011) who indicated that translation activities may help students in reading comprehension. As reading comprehension is an aspect of language ability, Mahmoud (2006) contends that translation can improve reading comprehension because it encourages careful reading at both word level and text level. Furthermore, ESP students might have a much better understanding of specific uses of terminologies in contexts. English passages to be translated into Farsi might be viewed as a workshop in which the students would practice grammar and reading comprehension and this would implicitly enhance their language ability.

The second translation activity in ESP official textbook is of great assistance in teaching new vocabularies. According to Swan (1997), translation is essential for teaching vocabularies, which are not present in class and could not be unambiguously illustrated. In ESP context in which most of vocabularies are abstract, learning the native equivalents might considerably be helpful. An array of findings of other studies was found in favor of positive effect of translation on learning vocabularies. To mention a few, Saeidi and Jafari (2011) found that translation positively contributes to raise consciousness of students about vocabularies in ESP textbooks.

The results of an investigation done by Akbari (2011) pointed to the positive role of translation in learning vocabularies. He asserted that "the main strategy of learning new vocabulary was memorization" (p.23). Carreres (2006) holds a similar viewpoint about the positive influence of translation and claims that translation is conducive to grammar and vocabulary learning. Apart from other findings, this finding also stresses the significance of translation activities in teaching language ability like reading comprehension. It appears that translation activity 1 is of greater assistance in terms of learning LA rather than translation activity 2. This might be because vocabularies and grammatical structures are learned much faster and

more effectively in a meaningful context than when they are decontextualized.

In the viewpoint of raters, translation activities as a means to teach translation ability were not found to play a significant role in ESP official textbooks. Apparently translation activities in ESP textbooks do not shoulder such a role, although, such activities, according to Carreres (2006), inevitably might provide remarkably profound insights into the foreign culture and stylistic awareness.

Including translation activities as a means to learn language ability might build a desirable context to promote national values and minimize foreign vocabularies in scientific texts. Cook (2010) points to a reformist educational program in Canada that uses intra-national understanding. ESP book developers might also intend to enforce such a policy in Iran by using translation activities in ESP textbooks.

In sum, translation as a means to teach language ability and translation ability could possibly be two extremes of a continuum, none of which might be used in its absolute sense, and its use as a means to either of ends may be, thus, cautiously advocated. Cook (2010) argues that "different students in different contexts may need like, or benefit from translation in teaching a language to a greater or lesser extent depending on their learning purposes previous experiences and styles of learning" (p.134).

8. Conclusion

From the very beginning of learning and teaching a foreign language, using translation has long being debated over. Through diverse approaches and method of teaching foreign language, translations either has been supported as an aid to learning a foreign language or impede it. However, the story of using translation in ESP context might be different and this motivated the current study. This study aimed at investigating the role and place of translation in ESP textbooks published by SAMT. To pinpoint the status of translation in ESP textbooks, the frequency of translation activities and the space allocated to them in eight categories were estimated. Moreover, a checklist was developed to help address the role of translation activities.

The findings reflected variations in both the frequency of translation activities and the space allocation. Further, translation activities in these series of textbooks assist ESP students to learn language ability (LA). Interestingly the results of this study support the findings of previous studies on the positive role of translation in teaching and learning a foreign language. Yet, one of the goals pursued in ESP teaching practice is training proficient translators and developing translation skills and strategies.

Every study might suffer from some technical or methodological shortcomings and this study is no exception for sure. This study was a qualitative investigation on the role of translation in a limited number of ESP textbook and only two experts rated the checklist. Moreover, there might be some feature of translation as a means to learn language ability and translation ability that could not be itemize in checklist.

In addition, a limited sampling was considered to be checked, given that, it is recommended that larger samples of ESP textbooks be taken into account in future studies. Investigations on the role of translation in ESP textbooks via quantitative could yield different findings. The attitudes of ESP students and teachers toward the use and the role of translation could also open a new line of investigation.

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Appendix A: sampled textbooks

1. English for the students of pharmacy
2. English for the students of veterinary
3. English for the students of laboratory technology
4. English for the students of animal science
5. English for the students of sociology
6. English for the students of research in social science
7. English for the students of social work
8. English for social science
9. English for the students of speech therapy

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10. English for business administration
11. English for educational administration
12. English for the students of management
13. English for the students of visual arts
14. English for the students of Persian literature
15. English for the students of theology and Islamic science
16. English for the students of journalism and mass media
17. English for the students of political science.
18. English for the students of history
19. English for the students of physics
20. English for the students of statistics
21. English for the students of surveying
22. English for the students of applied physics
23. English for the students of horticulture science
24. English for the students of agriculture
25. English for the students of plant protection
26. English for the students of mechanical engineering design of solids
27. English for the students of industrial engineering
28. English for the students of engineering
29. English for the students of textile engineering
30. English for the students of soil, water and environment

Appendix B: Rating Checklist

The role of translation activities in ESP official textbooks:

Instruction

This checklist was designed to evaluate the role of translation activities in official ESP textbook published by SAMT. Please check translation activities in sampled textbooks and rate the following items from 1 to 6. The asterisked items characterize the features of language ability (LA) and the other items reflect the features means to teach translation ability (TA).

Thanks for your time and collaboration.

This Translation activity in ESP textbooks is intended to:	Translation activity 1	Translation activity 2
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<p>1*. Help students learn grammar.</p> <p>2*. Help students learn vocabulary.</p> <p>3*. Help students develop reading comprehension.</p> <p>4. Help students develop extra linguistic knowledge. (Cross cultural knowledge, knowing about the text to be translated).</p> <p>5. Help students develop bilingual knowledge. (The linguistic knowledge, textual knowledge, socio linguistic knowledge, pragmatic knowledge).</p> <p>6*. Help students develop writing.</p> <p>7. Help students develop the translation knowledge. (Knowledge about the methods and procedures of translation, knowing about how to translate).</p> <p>8*. Help students develop speaking.</p> <p>9. Help students develop Instrumental knowledge. (The knowledge about using documentation sources and information technologies for translation).</p> <p>10. Help students develop strategic knowledge. (The knowledge of solving translation problems and obtaining efficient translation).</p> <p>11. Help students develop Psycho-physiological knowledge. (The knowledge about critical thinking, perseverance, and time limit</p>		
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to pay attention). 12*. Help students develop listening.		
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