English Translation Students' Vocabulary Learning Strategies:

A Comparative Study of Gender

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Abstract

This study attempted to inspect the relationship between gender and vocabulary learning strategies used by Iranian English translation students. After piloting the study and validating the questionnaire (a vocabulary learning strategies questionnaire developed by Soodmand Afshar, 2010), it was administered to the participants of the study. One hundred Iranian English translation students completed this questionnaire. The participants were then divided into male and female students. Results indicated that two out of five most and four out of five least frequently used strategies were commonly shared by both male and female students. The findings of t-tests also indicated that there were no significant differences between male English translation students and female English translation students' overall strategy use.

Keywords: English translation students, language learning strategies, overall strategy use, vocabulary learning strategies

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, there has been an increasing number of research into L2 vocabulary learning strategies. As a result there has been a shift from teacher-controlled learning to student-centered learning (Schmitt, 2000). Because of that, more attention was paid to vocabulary due to the increasing interest in student-centered learning which prepares learners for the communicative world. The incremental interest in autonomous learning has given rise to research into second language learning strategies (LLSs) researchers like Rubin (1987), Wenden and Rubin (1987), Chamot (1987), Skehan (1989), Oxford

(1990), and so on. Some of these language learning strategies are vocabulary-specific strategies that can be used to boost vocabulary.

Second language vocabulary received more attention in the communicative approach because it aims to prepare learners to operate in communicative world (Meara, 1995). Direct vocabulary learning continued to be neglected because it was believed that it can be a by-product of constant exposure to the use of L2 (Marton, 1977); so, implicit vocabulary learning was seen as more effective compared to the mnemonic techniques which were encouraged in the grammar translation approach.

Such researches have accented the role of vocabulary learning in second language learning. Management of vocabulary learning in terms of dealing with certain learning difficulties, teaching specific learners and successful methods for teaching vocabulary have been the focus of the work in the area of vocabulary (Laufer, 1997). According to Sokmen (1997), the implicit vocabulary learning becomes more important as the learner's proficiency level increases. Accordingly, it can be inferred that the strategy of guessing new words does not by itself fulfill learners' needs for thorough acquisition of vocabulary items necessary for different stages of learning. Nowadays theorists believe that learners need to learn the strategic skills of both explicit and implicit L2 vocabulary learning. Second language learners need to learn L2 vocabulary both explicitly and implicitly (Nation, 2001).

As mentioned in above discussions, many researchers have emphasized the importance of vocabulary for different language learning purposes. So, translation and translation training is far from being unique. It goes without saying that a good translation depends on good comprehension of the text and good comprehension to a large extend depends upon sufficient vocabulary knowledge. The largest reading comprehension problem for L2 learners is found to be insufficient vocabulary knowledge (Huckin, 1993). Thus, insufficient vocabulary knowledge will result in flaws in translation. Some other studies reported positive correlations between vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension. In a study by Rashidi and Khosravi (2010) the role of vocabulary knowledge in students' comprehension was investigated. Findings suggest that students with stronger vocabulary were better in comprehension. Since vocabulary knowledge gives us better comprehension of meaning, it can help translators in better conveyance of meaning when translating. So, this study tries to investigate vocabulary learning strategies used among Iranian English Translation Students, because to the best of our knowledge no study has ever tried to investigate overall tendencies among Iranian English Translation Students in particular, with regard to their use and evaluation of VLSs.

Gender has usually caught the eye of researchers, though, the number of researches fulfilled on the topic is relatively small (Catalan, 2003).Vocabulary learning seems to be an area where gender might be considered a distinguishing factor (Boyle, 1987). Catalan (2003), reported that the females were more inclined to use new vocabulary learning

strategies than their male counterparts, a finding which was confirmed by Oxford (1990).

Gu (2002, cited in Ranalli, 2003) believes that female students are more successful than their male counterparts in language learning; he emphasizes that, the women who employed more frequently the vocabulary learning strategies, found to lead to successful learning. In fact we can say that there is significant differences between male and female students in choosing learning strategies (Catalan, 2003). Some studies believe that men are more inclined to make greater use of individual strategies (Green and Oxford, 1995). Some other studies believe that females used a greater number of vocabulary learning strategies and they used some strategies more frequently than males, and for some strategies men showed higher frequencies of strategy use than women (Catalan, 2003).

But there are some other studies that have emphasized on similarity of man and woman strategy use, for example Riazi and Khodadadi (2007) and Soodmand Afshar's (2010), concluded that gender had no significant effect on Students strategy use.

THIS STUDY

In order to bridge the research gap in the case of Iranian English translation students' vocabulary learning strategies, tries to find out what vocabulary learning strategies were used most and least frequently by Male and Female Iranian English translation students. So, the following research questions are addressed:

- What are the vocabulary learning strategies used by English translation students in general?
- What are the five vocabulary learning strategies most and least frequently used by Male English translation students?
- What are the five vocabulary learning strategies most and least frequently used by Female English translation students?

METHOD

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 100 Iranian English translation students from two universities (50 English translation students from University of Isfahan, and 50 English translation students from Sheikh Bahaei University).

Materials

A Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire (VLSQ) developed by Soodmand Afshar (2010) was used in this study. It included 45 statements on a Likert Scale ranging from 1 (never or almost never true of me) to 5 (always or almost always true of me). This questionnaire was used to elicit the Iranian participants' self-reported vocabulary

learning strategies. In order to guarantee the validity of the questionnaire, the following steps have been taken:

At the beginning of the study, the questionnaire was piloted on a group of 20 Iranian English translation students, who were asked to describe and write down other strategies (other than the strategies included in the questionnaire) that they usually employ for learning vocabulary of English as a foreign language. The purpose behind this was to make sure strategies adopted by Iranian English translation students, which were not in the questionnaire are not missing from the VLSQ of the study. We found no statements or strategies obtaining a mean below 1.5 (out of 5) which indicated that the strategies were never or almost never used by the learners; We also found no new strategy suggested by students to be added to questionnaire, so no strategies were omitted from the original questionnaire developed by Soodmand Afshar (2010) and no strategy was added to it.

Procedure

To meet the purpose of the study, we divided the participants into 2 groups of Male and Female English translation students. Thus, based on what was mentioned above, 31 students were placed in the Males group, and 61 students in the Females group. The Male and Female learners were asked to complete the questionnaire referred to earlier. The questionnaire was administered to all the participants of the study by the researchers and they were informed of the following points before beginning to complete them:

1. The questionnaires is not a test, thus, there are no right or wrong answers. So, the participants were encouraged to answer as many questions as possible.

2. They were required to make their decisions based on their real opinions.

3. The researchers remained in class and gave them detailed instructions on how the VLSQ was to be filled in.

4. The participants were informed that there was no time limit for completing the questionnaires. However, it took about 20 minutes for them to complete the VLSQ.

5- Participants were required to answer the questioner without asking their peers for help.

Data Analysis

Using SPSS version 15.5, the quantitative data analysis was carried out including means, standard deviations, frequencies, percentages which were calculated to reflect the participants' responses to 45 strategies listed in VLSQ. T-test was also used to compare the overall strategy use by Male and Female English translation students.

RESULTS

Tables 1 and 2 below indicate the results of the first research question.

Table 1. The Five Most Frequently Used Strategies by English Translation Students in General (both male and female)

Rank	Number of strategy	strategies	Mean	S.D	Number of respondents
1	2	I use a monolingual English dictionary	3.75	0.87	100
2	42	I learn new words by reading books, newspapers, magazines, etc in English	3.75	0.93	98
3	6	I guess the meaning of a new word using background knowledge, general world knowledge and the immediate and the wider context	3.67	0.97	97
4	1	I make use of a bilingual (English–Persian or Persian-English) dictionary	3.52	1.07	100
5	29	I make an image of the word's meaning	3.5	0.89	97

Table 2. The Five Least Frequently Used Strategies by English Translation Students in General (both male and female)

Rank	Number of strategy	strategies	Mean	S.D	Number of respondents
1	12	I write down the word, its definition/synonym, its pronunciation, its part of speech (e.g. noun, verb, adj.,adv., etc) and an example sentence in which the word is used	1.95	0.99	100
2	44	I draw a picture of the new word	1.97	1.13	100
3	11	I write down the word, its definition/synonym, its pronunciation and an example in which the word is used	2	1.05	100
4	13	I write down the word, its definition/synonym, its pronunciation, its part of speech, an example sentence in which the word is used and other grammatically related words	2	0.88	100
5	4	I ask my teacher for an English sentence including the new word	2.2	1.05	100
	33	I use physical actions when learning a new word	2.2	0.96	97

The second question is answered in Tables 3 and 4 as follows:

Table 3. The Five Most Frequently Used Strategies by Males

Rank	Number of strategy	strategies	Mean	S.D	Number of respondents
1	6	I guess the meaning of a new word using background knowledge, general world knowledge and the immediate and the wider context	3.85	1.11	39
2	27	I focus on the phonological form (i.e. the pronunciation) of the new word	3.80	1.15	39
3	42	I learn new words by reading books, newspapers, magazines, etc in English	3.7	0.96	37
4	2	I use a monolingual English dictionary	3.7	0.88	37
5	1	I make use of a bilingual (English–Persian or Persian-English) dictionary	3.15	1.05	37

Table 4. The Five Least Frequently Used Strategies by Males

Rank	Number of strategy	strategies	Mean	S.D	Number of respondents
1	12	I write down the word, its definition/synonym, its pronunciation, its part of speech (e.g. noun, verb, adj.,adv., etc) and an example sentence in which the word is used	1.75	1.08	39
2	33	I use physical actions when learning a new word	1.8	1.02	39
3	4	I ask my teacher for an English sentence including the new word	1.8	0.88	38
4	11	I write down the word, its definition/synonym, its pronunciation and an example in which the word is used	1.85	0.86	39
5	44	I draw a picture of the new word	1.9	0.96	39

The third question is answered in Tables 5 and 6 as follows:

Table 5. The Five Most Frequently Used Strategies by Females

Rank	Number of strategy	strategies	Mean	S.D	Number of respondents
1	1	I make use of a bilingual (English–Persian or Persian-English) dictionary	3.9	0.89	60
2	2	I use a monolingual English dictionary	3.8	1.10	61
3	41	I learn new words by listening to live English media like BBC, VOA, etc, and by watching English TV channels and movies word	3.7	1.05	57
4	16	I memorize word lists (i.e. lists of words in English with their Persian equivalents	3.6	0.95	60
5	18	I connect the new word to a personal experience	3.45	0.87	58

Table 6. The Five Least Frequently Used Strategies by Females

Rank	Number of strategy	strategies	Mean	S.D	Number of respondents
1	3	I ask my teacher for an L1 translation	1.75	0.96	61
2	44	I draw a picture of the new word	2.05	0.96	61
3	12	I write down the word, its definition/synonym, its pronunciation, its part of speech (e.g. noun, verb, adj., adv., etc) and an example sentence in which the word is used	2.15	1.13	61
4	11	I write down the word, its definition/synonym, its pronunciation and an example in which the word is used	2.15	0.98	59
5	33	I use physical actions when learning a new word	2.6	0.89	60

Table 7. T-test comparing Male and Females' Overall Vocabulary Learning Strategy Use

Groups	Mean	SD	N	t	df	p
Male	2.65	0.2882	39	1.01	98	0.6301
Female	2.72	0.2691	61			

Details of Table 7 cry that there is no statistically significant difference between Male and Female English translation students in using vocabulary learning strategies (df = 58, t= 1.01,P= 0.6301> 0.05). There are some other studies that have emphasized on

similarity of man and woman strategy use, for example, Soodmand Afshar's (2010), concluded that gender had no significant effect on Students' strategy use. Our observations from Tables 1 to 6 shows that there are two most frequently used strategies common to all tables (strategies number 1 & 2). These strategies include, *I make use of a bilingual (English–Persian or Persian-English) dictionary and I use a monolingual English dictionary.* We have four least frequently used strategies (11, 12, 33 & 44) commonly shared by all tables though their positions vary. These strategies include*, I write down the word, its definition/synonym, its pronunciation and an example in which the word is Used, I write down the word, its definition/synonym, its pronunciation, its part of speech (e.g. noun, verb, adj., adv., etc) and an example sentence in which the word is used, I use physical actions when learning a new word, I draw a picture of the new word.*

DISCUSSION

Based on findings of Tables 1, 3 and 5, it is seen that the most frequently used strategies by all the three groups was learning new words through using dictionaries. The fact that learning vocabulary through dictionaries is one of the most frequently used strategies, proves translators' daily use of dictionaries because of requirement of their field or their job as a translator.

One of the most frequently used strategy by English Translation Students (in general) was *I learn new words by reading books, newspapers and magazines in English.* According to Soodmand Afshar (2010), the fact that learning vocabulary through extensive reading is one of the most frequently used strategies even by poor learners seems to lend support to Nation's (2001,p. 144) assertion that "control of the reading can be a major factor in vocabulary development for both native and non-native speakers". Another line of support for the popularity of reading strategies with all groups comes from the findings of research on L1 reading indicating that, as Stahl (1990) maintains, vocabulary and reading have a close reciprocal relationship. Considerable number of studies can also be found in SLA which indicate that second language reading can lead to measurable vocabulary acquisition (Elley and Mangubhai, 1983; Paribakht and Wesche, 1997; Pitts, White, and Krashen, 1989). Other strategy most frequently used by English Translation Students (in general) was *I guess the meaning of a new word using background knowledge, general world knowledge and the immediate and the wider context.* It again proves translators' daily challenge with different texts because of the requirement of their course or their job as a translator.

Four out of five least frequently used strategies common among all groups were *I write down the word, its definition/synonym, its pronunciation and an example in which the word is Used, I write down the word, its definition/synonym, its pronunciation, its part of speech (e.g. noun, verb, adj., adv., etc) and an example sentence in which the word is used, I use physical actions when learning a new word, I draw a picture of the new word..* The result of our study about the most least frequent strategy used by English translation

students which was *writing down the word, its definition/synonym, its pronunciation, its part of speech, an example in which the word is used* corresponds with findings of Gu and Johnson (1996), saying that Note-taking strategies are usually least frequently used strategy by learners. The second least frequently used strategy common among the three groups was *using physical actions when learning a new word.* It is also against the achievements of Soodmand Afshar's (2010), in which taking notes of the new words in class was the fourth most frequently used strategy by learners. This finding could be well supported by that of Qingquan (2008) who found that this strategy was used only seldom by learners indicating lack of flexibility of use of this strategy for learning too many words.

The findings of tables 3 & 5 show that Male students in comparison to Female students have more focus on learning words through guessing the meaning of the words, picking words through various sources (by reading books, newspapers, magazines, etc. in English) and have a higher inclination to use phonological properties of new words.

On the other hand, the findings of Tables 4 & 6 show that both Male and Female students have the same weak point of neglecting note taking as one of important strategies for boosting vocabulary. Another similarity of these two groups lies in here that none of them believe in learning vocabulary through asking teacher; this information also accentuates the Autonomous nature of L2 vocabulary learning as an important aspect for two reasons: First, second language vocabulary learning requirements go beyond a standard teacher-led course (Nation, 1990; Tudor, 1993); Second, teacher-learner contact is often weak (Tudor, 1993; Cotterall, 1995). It is also shown in Tables 5 and 7 that both Male and Female English translation students are weak in drawing pictures of the new words and learning new words by using physical actions. So, generally speaking Male and Female students have the same weak points but to some extent different preference in the use of the most frequent strategies.

CONCLUSION

There were two most frequently used strategies common in all Tables (strategies number 1 & 2). These strategies include, *I make use of a bilingual (English–Persian or Persian-English) dictionary and I use a monolingual English dictionary*. We have four least frequently used strategies (11,12, 33 & 44) commonly shared by all tables though their positions vary, these strategies include, *I write down the word, its definition/ synonym, its pronunciation and an example in which the word is Used, I write down the word, its definition/synonym, its pronunciation, its part of speech (e.g. noun, verb, adj., adv., etc) and an example sentence in which the word is used, I use physical actions when learning a new word*, *I draw a picture of the new word*. The implications of these findings suggest that English Translation Students would need to engage more in practicing *these Strategies* to enhance their learning and memory of the vocabulary, since are among least frequent strategy used by learners.

There were no significant differences between Male and Female students in the case of least frequent vocabulary learning strategies. They had the same weak point of neglecting note taking as one of important strategies for boosting vocabulary. Another similarity of these two groups is that none of them believe in learning vocabulary through asking teacher; this information also accentuates the autonomous nature of L2 vocabulary learning. It is also mentioned in tables 4 and 6 that both Male and Female English translation students are weak in drawing pictures of the new words and learning new words by using physical actions.

Findings of this study also showed that Male students in comparison to Female students have more focus on learning words through guessing the meaning of the words, picking words through various sources (by reading books, newspapers, magazines, etc in English) and have a higher inclination to use phonological properties of new words.

The results of T-test showed that there were no statistically significant differences between Male and Female English translation students' overall strategy use. This fact is against findings of Gu (2002), and Catalan (2003) in which gender resulted in significant differences. So, gender has not that much effect on the overall strategy use of the learners. Findings of this study is aligned with findings of Soodmand Afshar's (2010), and Riazi and Khodadadi (2007) which indicated that the students' gender did not cause any differences in their strategy use.

The present study tried to fulfill the aim of giving valuable information to students and even to teachers so that they bring them into attention when learning and teaching vocabulary. Teachers should take into consideration the differences between males and females, and see the needs of two groups when teaching them various strategies of vocabulary learning.

Further studies can also be directed to investigate the effect of following factors on vocabulary learning strategy use among English translation students:

1- Effect of cultural background; O'Malley et al. (1985) also argued that Hispanic learners were more interested than Asian students in trying new strategies and more responsive to strategy-training. Politzer (1983; cited in Oxford and Ehrman, 1995) found that Asian learners preferred greater rote memorization, due to previous school experience which put more emphasis on memorization and rehearsal while Hispanic learners used more social, interactive strategies. Cultural difference has a strong effect on the appropriateness of learning and teaching methodology (Hurd, 2003).

2- Effect of students first language; the linguistic relation between L1 and L2 can affect the use of some strategies. The use of cognates is not possible for Japanese learners of English, for example (Schmitt, 1997; Wharton, 2000), whereas German learners of English can benefit from this strategy.

3- Language Learning Environment; learning environment is socio-cultural-political environment (It can include teachers, peers, classroom climate, social and cultural tradition of learning, curriculum, and availability of input and output opportunities) where learning takes place. These factors can affect the appropriateness of strategy use according to the given learning environment. Therefore, a strategy which is suitable or possible in a certain learning environment may become inappropriate in another (Gu, 2003).

4- Effect of the age; strategy use can be affected by the age of learners (Oxford, 1989). Some studies show that Japanese learners' use of some VLSs changes over time (Schmitt, 1997).

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