

Contribution of Reading Comprehension to Translation

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1. Introductory Remarks

It is generally noticed that translation achievement of the undergraduate or sometimes postgraduate students specialized in the English language does not reach the required standard. This phenomenon definitely results from different inadequacies pertinent to their studies of English.

Translation represents an effective means of communication and interaction between individuals and cultures. Thus, one of the requirements of achieving a good translation is that it is supposed that the translator should have well and highly developed skills. Among the skills, the translator must have an ability in comprehending the Source Text (ST) (Ilyas, 1989: 153-36).

Thus, we hypothesize that the practice of reading the ST and the attempts to comprehend the intended meaning of the ST will contribute well in producing an equivalent and appropriate Target Text (TT).

The present study aims at shedding light on the significance of Reading Comprehension (RC) in translation. We believe, like many others, that RC can be of a benefit to the translator. In fact, at least in the present study, we do not necessarily claim that the translator has to be professional . Whether the people who translate are amateurs or trainees of translation, they are in a dire need to read

and comprehend the ST to get, to some extent, satisfactory results in rendering the TT.

2. Reading Comprehension

Gebhard (2006:194) indicates that reading is a process intended to find out meaning in the written form of language in a social context "through bottom-up and top-down processing, and use of strategies and skills". Gebhard (Ibid:195) explains how comprehension results from reading as follows:

To comprehend written language, we rely on our ability to recognize words, phrases, and sentences [bottom-up or text-driven processing], as well as on our background knowledge related to the content of what we are reading [top-down or conceptually-driven processing]. These two processes interact as we read, resulting in a degree of comprehension.

Mikulecky and Jeffries (1996 : 14) attempt to compare human brain with a very complicated computer where messages ,i.e. pieces of information are inserted so as to be interpreted, sorted and saved. In the brain, if the received information finds a kind of connection with the inherent information, it will remain in the "long-term memory". If the received information does not meet with the previous information, it will quickly vanish. The same happens in the process of reading.

Reading provides the learner with numerous abilities. Among them is that s/he responds to the exact meaning of the words from the context. Added to that, the learner may deduce the meaning of the words which are unfamiliar to him/her from "contextual or internal clues" instead of coming across a dictionary. This has

occurred in spite of the idea that unfamiliar vocabulary hinders his/her easy-going progress in the text.(McGregor & Bright , 1970 : 56)

Moreover, Mikulecky and Jeffries (1996 : 1) assert that reading skill is highly significant because it contributes in enhancing the foreign learners' abilities in :

- 1.learning to think in English,
- 2.enriching vocabulary,
- 3.improving writing skill,
- 4.practising English when they live in a "non-English speaking ountry",
- 5.preparing to study in an English speaking country, and
- 6.groping their way for new ideas, facts and experiences.

3.Translation and Comprehension

Dancette (1993 : 379) initiates his study which concerns the measurement of comprehension by stating that comprehension of the ST is the main core in the process of translation. If comprehension is not sufficient or the translator lacks comprehension, the translator's attempt to find out meaning is doomed to failure. This is because all the process of translation is based on looking for the meaning expressed in the ST which should be re-expressed in the TT.

Aziz and Latawishi (2000: 4) express that translation can be viewed as a process and a product. When translation is regarded as a process, it is a human activity performed by any person. In this connection, "human beings are the only creatures who practice the activity of translation". When translation is viewed as a product, it accounts for the historical fact that we have been provided with tremendous information from the ancient civilizations via translation. In addition, Aziz and Latawishi (Ibid) find that translation has been defined by many theorists and they practically

prefer that the definition which states that "translation is replacing a text in one language by another text on another language" is more appropriate. This definition will narrow the meaning of translation in the sense that it deals with translating texts depending on the context and the process of translation cannot be achieved without the existence of two languages.

What has been stated before conforms with Larson (1984 cited in Thelen 1990: 289). Larson discriminates between form and meaning. He upholds the idea which calls for that meaning should be kept constant in the translation process. This belief is obvious from Figure (1) below:

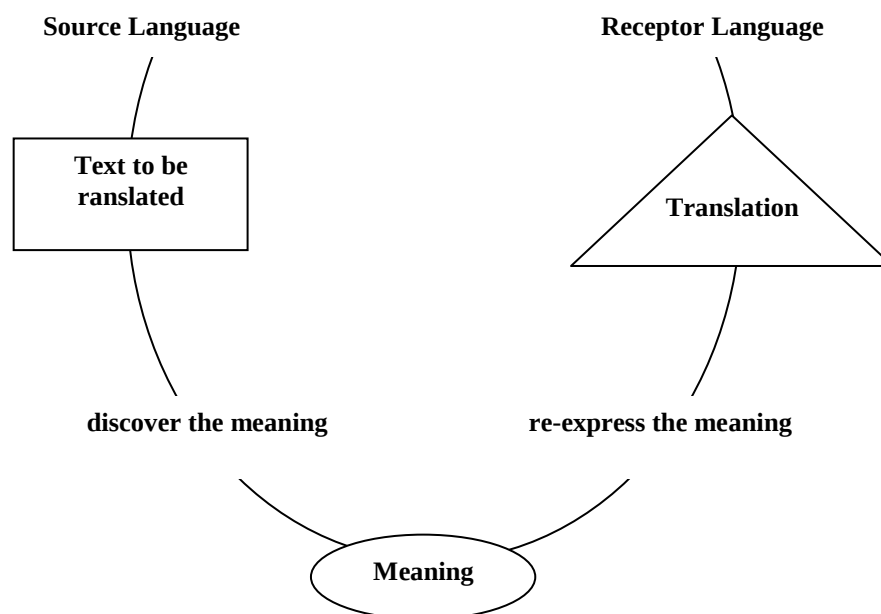


Figure1: Thelen, 1990:289

Newmark (1988: 11-13) states that translation process starts with the translator's reading of the ST. The purpose lies behind this reading is to recognize the content of the text and analyze it from the translator's point of view. Text understanding entails two types of reading, i.e., general and close. General reading, in one hand, intends to extract that the reader understands the main or general meaning of a piece of writing. On the other hand, close reading requires that the translator has to understand the meaning of the words in and out of the context. Every word has to be looked up so as not to miss any particle of the context. In other words, the translator who is now a reader has to find out the denotative and connotative meanings in the text. In the process of reading, the reader has to look for "the intention of the text". In this connection, it is usual that the intentions of the translator and of the ST author have to be compatible to each other.

Sager (1994: 197-202) emphasizes that RC is a stage in the process of undertaking a piece of a translation. This stage comprises of cognitive, linguistic and pragmatic levels. These levels and their pertinent questions have to be answered by the translator when the translator plays the role of the reader before s/he undertakes translating a specific piece of writing. The purpose lying behind reading the text is to add new information to the knowledge already exists. In a similar vein, reading and comprehension of the translator differ from those of any other reader. The questions to be answered by the translator and consequently the reader are as follows:

1. Cognitive: the questions are designed to answer:
 - a. What is the text about?
 - b. What does the text say in general?
 - c. What does the text say in detail?
2. Pragmatic: the reader has to answer the question:
 - a. What is the purpose of the writer?

3. Linguistic: in this level, the questions are about:
 - a. The linguistic features of the text.
 - b. How the text is syntactically structured.
 - c. What words are used in the text.

The linguistic analysis of the text, according to Sager, represents a real acclamation on the part of the reader, i.e., the translator with the ST. S/he has to notice the graphological levels, i.e., spelling, punctuation, paragraphing, spacing, etc. and the phonological structure used in the text such as rhetorical devices of rhyme, rhythm, etc. In the morphological analysis, word formation, word classes, tense and aspect, etc. have to be taken into account. In the semantic level, the choice of vocabulary items, particularly, denotation, connotation, personal pronouns and the figures of speech used in the text have to be recognized. In the syntactic level, the reader has to be acquainted with word order, kind of sentence, etc. Lastly, the compository level of the text, i.e., the cataphoric and anaphoric references have to be taken into consideration. (Ibid)

At the same time, however, Baker (1992: 229) pinpoints that if readers do not comprehend the lexical and syntactic structures inside a certain text, they are not able to extract the implied meanings. In any verbal communication, it is of an insistent need to understand what goes on inside the text because, in translation, misunderstanding of the lexical and syntactic structures may lead to mistranslation.

Finally, the relationship between reading and comprehension is summarized by Richard (2002: 279) as follows:

Formal aspects of language and
genre structure contribute to readers'
developing comprehension and
inferencing abilities. Awareness of

text structure is a critical aspect of reading comprehension and learners who are aware of text structure have better comprehension abilities.

4. Experiment and Test

As a verification of the previous hypothesis, twenty students of the fourth stage studied English in the Department of English at the College of Education/ University of Tikreet have been chosen at random to be the subjects of the present study.

We have conducted an experiment in which ten of the students will study a passage taken from Fluency in English by L.G. Alexander (1967) (see Appendix A). The students are up to graduate and it is supposed that they would develop the language skills on their own. Thus, we choose this textbook because it is claimed by its author that it is an integrated course for advanced learners. Alexander (n.p.: 1967) states that one of the groups for whom the course is intended is "Advanced students who wish to study on their own".

In the experiment, the researcher plays the role of the instructor who is in charge of teaching the passage in study due to the instructions mentioned in the above textbook. He also takes into account the techniques followed in teaching RC and the levels of the questions to be asked in this regard as mentioned in the theoretical side of the present study (see Section3). Teaching the passage has been performed within three lectures. Each lecture lasts for two hours. The emphasis of the instructor is laid on the cognitive reading and the semantic and pragmatic levels of understanding the passage. The linguistic level of the passage is also taken into account, particularly, the meaning of the words, sentences and the text in general. In the process of teaching, the

researcher tries his best to obviate speaking or giving equivalent words or expressions in the Arabic language. This group of the students is named 'Group A'. On the other hand, the other ten students are named 'Group B'. They are left without teaching the passage in study. In fact, they have been informed that they will be tested next month in translating a passage from English into Arabic. They do not know what goes on with Group A.

A month later, the two groups, A and B, are asked to bring their dictionaries with them to the class because they have to be tested in translating a passage in the following day. Both of the groups are not informed what passage they are going to translate. They have just been informed to bring their dictionaries with them because we believe that dictionary is useful but it cannot be the decisive tool in translating. In this connection, Farghal and Shunnaq (1999: 35) express that the use of the dictionary in translation is beneficial because it provides the translator with some information which may help the translator to do a sound decision when s/he translates. But the dictionary by itself cannot make a competent translator. This is because:

translating is a complex process involving many facets that are practically missing in most dictionaries such as collocational, textual, and discoursal parameters, in addition to the cultural parameter, which is inadequately covered in most dictionaries.

For both of the groups, A and B, the test of translating the passage lasts for two hours with the assistance of dictionaries as an equal chance for all.

5. Students' Background in Reading Comprehension

The subjects of the study, i.e., the students of the fourth stage are asked as their background in RC is concerned. They claim that they had studied RC within two courses. One course was in the first stage and the other was in the second stage. In the first stage, they studied the textbook named Developing Skills by L.G. Alexander (1967). In the second stage, they studied the textbook, Sixty Steps to Précis by L.G. Alexander with the textbook entitled College Composition by Fakhir A. Razzak and Helen Al-Hassan (2000) to meet the requirements of a course under the name of 'Composition and Comprehension'.

We think that this simple survey of the students' background in RC reveals that the student's abilities in RC are not satisfactory. As a matter of fact, it seems that the students study RC for one year only. Irrespective of the techniques used by the instructors in charge of teaching the textbook Sixty Steps to Précis, the textbook is concerned with providing the students with teaching material of Précis as one of the activities in writing skill. Any reader of the above textbook definitely finds out that these sixty steps are practically recommended to help the students write summaries for the passage of the textbook and not evaluate the students' comprehension via reading.

6. Result of the Test

Generally, the test of translation has elicited that Group A scores high marks in comparison with the marks of Group B. Table 1 below shows the results obtained by the two groups:

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Table 1
Results of the Groups A and B in the Test

Group A		Group B	
Testee No.	Mark	Testee No.	Mark
1.	6	1.	2.5
2.	7	2.	4
3.	5	3.	5
4.	5.5	4.	5.5
5.	8	5.	3
6.	5	6.	3.5
7.	6	7.	2
8.	8	8.	3
9.	3	9.	2
10.	7	10.	2

According to the results in the table above, the number of the students who succeed in the test in Group A is (9) out of (10) whereas the number of the ones who succeed in Group B is (2) out of (10). This means that the success ratio in Group A is 90% and 20% in Group B respectively.

It is apparently noticed that the marks of success in Group A are higher than these in Group B. The marks of success in Group A range from (5) to (8). The only two marks of success in Group B contrast sharply with the marks in Group A. They range from (5) to (5.5).

7. Discussion of the Results

It is necessary to mention here that the examiner who marks the students' achievement in the translation test is not the researcher. He is an instructor whose specialization is translation.

He has written down some notes and comments on the students' translations. The notes read : overtranslating in limited positions of the text, poor style, overlapping between translating and transliteration, paragraphing the text and absence of a coherent text. The previous notes and comments are highly significant. But, in the present study, they have to be excluded because, in advance, we presuppose that the students are not professional translators. In fact, they are students who have a little opportunity in studying and practicing translation in the fourth stage. During the test, they have just finished their first semester. Thus, they are mere trainees in translation, if not amateurs, for a very short period of time. We may say that in the course of the translation they are studying in this year, they do not have a profound theoretical background in translation and their experience and practice is limited.

Added to the above, their previous background in RC is also limited because they have studied only one course in one academic year in RC (See section 5). This covers both of the Groups , A and B. But the main difference is that Group A encounters a recent experience of study in RC to the passage of the test. Then, both of the groups take the test with the assistance of the dictionary.

The experiment and test conducted to the students have undoubtedly shown that the students of Group A have done well more than the ones in Group B. We think that the reason lying behind this is that they practice an experience of reading the selected passage. They have been given the chance to listen to the correct reading of the text twice or three times. They have read the text silently. They have been provided with the meanings of all the difficult words and expressions which they have never encountered before. All the meanings have been explained in English and according to the intended meanings of the context. They have discussions about the intention of the ST author and the

connotations inherent in the message that the writer intends to convey to the reader. Precisely, the students have practiced situation similar to that of a translator when s/he undertakes a piece of translation and how s/he deals with the ST to be reproduced into an equivalent (TT).

On the other hand, the students of Group B do not do well in the test of translation because they have just find themselves sitting a test with a prior notice. The test mainly requires that they have to translate the ST into TT without an appropriate span of time to read and comprehend all the details of the text. They have only just provided with the dictionaries which may help them in understanding denotations rather than connotations. Moreover; they have just a little experience in reading and comprehending texts as their previous background reveals.

8. Concluding Remarks

To conclude, the study undoubtedly elicits that translation cannot be performed well without an extensive reading for the ST. Comprehending the ST via reading assists the translator to produce an appropriate TT. Over and above, teaching of translation for one academic year does not suffice to provide the students with the required practice in this advanced skill, i.e. translation. Likewise, the students' weak achievement, particularly in Group B, proves that teaching of RC for one academic year does not enable the students to be acquainted with reading, comprehending and translating texts.

Therefore; there is an insistent need to increase the number of the courses in RC and translation in the departments of English at the Colleges of Art and Education. Such courses will be of great benefit to the students' future careers.

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II

Appendix A

Alfred the Great acted as his own spy, visiting Danish camps disguised as a minstrel. In those days wandering minstrels were welcome everywhere. They were not fighting men, and their harp was their passport. Alfred had learned many of their ballads in his youth, and could vary his programme with acrobatic tricks and simple conjuring.

While Alfred's little army slowly began to gather at Athelney, the king himself set out to penetrate the camp of Guthrum, the commander of the Danish invaders. These had settled down for the winter at Chippenham: thither Alfred went. He noticed at once that discipline was slack: the Danes had the self-confidence of conquerors, and their security precautions were casual. They lived well, on the proceeds of raids on neighbouring regions. There they collected women as well as food and drink, and a life of ease had made them soft.

Alfred stayed in the camp a week before he returned to Athelney. The force there assembled was trivial compared with the Danish horde. But Alfred had deduced that the Danes were no longer fit for prolonged battle: and that their commissariat had no organization, but depended on irregular raids.

So, faced with the Danish advance, Alfred did not risk open battle but harried the enemy. He was constantly on the move, drawing the Danes after him. His patrols halted the raiding parties: hunger assailed the Danish army. Now Alfred began a long series of skirmishes—and within a month the Danes had surrendered. The episode could reasonably serve as a unique epic of royal espionage!

BERNARD NEWMAN *Spies in Britain*



Alfred, disguised as a harpist, in the camp of the Danes

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Comprehension

Give short answers to these questions in your own words as far as possible. Use one complete sentence for each answer.

- a Give two reasons why it was easy for Alfred the Great to penetrate the Danish camp.
- b Explain briefly how Alfred defeated the Danes.

Vocabulary

Explain the meaning of the following words and phrases as they are used in the passage: disguised (l. 1); thither (l. 8); slack (l. 9); security precautions (l. 10); proceeds (l. 11); trivial (l. 14); harried (l. 17); assailed (l. 19); skirmishes (l. 20); unique (l. 21).

The Paragraph

1. Suggest a suitable title for this passage.
2. Which of the following statements are correct:
 - a In Alfred's time it was easy for a minstrel to gain access to an enemy camp.
 - b Guthrum was the place where the Danish invaders had their camp.
 - c Alfred defeated the Danes because he had a large army.
 - d During the English attack, the Danes found it difficult to obtain food.
3. The following sentences have been taken from the second paragraph (ll. 6-12). Arrange them in their correct order. Do not refer to the passage until you have finished the exercise:
 - a He noticed at once that discipline was slack: the Danes had the self-confidence of conquerors, and their security precautions were casual.
 - b These had settled down for the winter at Chippenham: thither Alfred went.
 - c There they collected women as well as food and drink, and a life of ease had made them soft.
 - d While Alfred's little army slowly began to gather at Athelney, the king himself set out to penetrate the camp of Guthrum, the commander of the Danish invaders.
 - e They lived well, on the proceeds of raids on neighbouring regions.

Key Structures

1. Note how we can use *a lot of* in place of *many (of)* and *much (of)*:
Instead of saying: Alfred had learned *many of* their ballads in his youth. (ll. 3-4)
We can say: Alfred had learned *a lot of* their ballads in his youth.
Write these sentences again using *much (of)* or *many (of)* in place of *a lot of*:
 - a There were *a lot of* people present at the reception.
 - b I haven't got *a lot of* books.
 - c I haven't brought *a lot of* luggage with me.
 - d *A lot of* the machinery in this factory is out of date.
 - e *A lot of* the shops in this area close on Wednesday afternoon.
2. Put the words in brackets in their correct position in these sentences. Do not refer to the passage until you have finished the exercise:
 - a He noticed that discipline was slack. (at once) (l. 9)
 - b They lived on the proceeds of raids on neighbouring regions. (well) (ll. 10-11)
 - c But Alfred had deduced that the Danes were fit for prolonged battle. (no longer) (ll. 14-15)
3. Note how *as well as* can be used to mean *in addition to*:
There they collected women *as well as* food and drink. (ll. 11-12)
Write two sentences using *as well as* in the same way.

4. Compare these two sentences:

Instead of saying: Their commissariat had *no* organization. (ll. 15-16)

We can say: Their commissariat hadn't *any* organization.

Supply suitable compounds with *no* or *any* in the following:

a ... called while you were out.

b Did you go ... last night?

c Haven't you got ... to do?

d He said he knew ... about it.

e I don't know ... by that name.

5. Give the correct form of the verbs in brackets. Do not refer to the passage until you have finished the exercise:

So, faced with the Danish advance, Alfred not (risk) open battle but (harry) the enemy. He (be) constantly on the move, (draw) the Danes after him. His patrols (halt) the raiding parties: hunger (assail) the Danish army. Now Alfred (begin) a long series of skirmishes—and within a month the Danes (surrender). (ll. 17-21)

Special Difficulties

1. Write sentences to bring out the difference between the following pairs of words: wandering (l. 2), wondering; learned (l. 3), taught; noticed (l. 9), remarked; conquerors (l. 10), winners; force (l. 13), strength.

2. Explain the meaning of the verbs and expressions in italics:

a These had *settled down* for the winter at Chippenham. (l. 8)

b Have you *settled* your account yet?

c They *settled* in Australia before the war.

d It's time we *settled* this question.

e He *settled* all his property on his wife.

3. Note this compound with *self*:

The Danes had the *self-confidence* of conquerors. (ll. 9-10)

Write sentences using the following:

self-assurance; self-denial; self-governing; self-centred.

4. Explain the words and expressions in italics:

a The Danes were no longer *fit for* prolonged battle. (l. 15)

b Does that coat *fit* you?

c I can't *fit* all these clothes *into* this suitcase.

d He may win the race today. He's extremely *fit* and in good form.

e He wrote that book in a sudden *fit* of energy.

f It's a good idea, but it doesn't *fit in with* our plans.

Appendix B

Q/ Translate the following passage into Arabic:

Alfred the Great acted as his own spy, visiting Danish camps disguised as a minstrel. In those days wandering minstrels were welcome everywhere. They were not fighting men, and their harp was their passport. Alfred had learned many of their ballads in his youth, and could vary his programme with acrobatic
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