An Analysis on Student Translation Competency as a Language Acquisition Evaluation

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Abstract

This article investigates the translation as an Arabic language acquisition strategy by students of Arabic as a foreign language. Based on the belief that the translation may at certain degree help students learn a foreign language if used correctly. The objective of this study was to examine Arabic learner's translation from Malay language as their mother tongue to Arabic language. Secondly is to analyze common errors faced during translation process. Mid-semester exam paper in December session 2013 was held in May contains several parts including comprehension, grammar, vocabulary and translation. The data of the study is Malay-Arabic translation part. The respondents participated were 105 students, which mean the number of scripts is 105 scripts. The analysis focused on student's vocabulary, grammatical structure, the effect of native language and the ability of students to write correctly. The study found that there are some advantages and disadvantages in the translation made by a student to obtain a translation of the Arabic language in the reality of communication context. Finally, there must have a translation drilling hence, translation methods can be applied as well in the process of teaching the Arabic language, especially for students who already have a first language competency.

Keywords: Translation, strategy, communication, error, analysis.

Introduction: Translation is not a new activity in the relationship between culture, economy, politics and education. According to an ancient note, translation activities have

already begun with a stone found in Egypt embodied in two different languages dated 3000 BC (Pogadaev 2005: 72). While aspects of its history, the great human civilization at one time and now stained and reinforced by a translation activities. In short, translation activities cannot be separated when two different language backgrounds met. Hence the need for translation is perceived primarily to ensure a smooth relationship and mutual understanding.

At this moment, the translation is still important in communication at the international level. Various forms of translation required for different purposes. Although sometimes the remuneration of the translation efforts was being disputed, but translation efforts are still developing by individuals and respected bodies or organizations. This proves that the translation is an important approach in creating relationships and strengthens understanding. In the practices of teaching and learning of foreign languages, the translation method is also used in the classroom. According to Kamarudin (1993: 97) this method involves a second language translation to native language or otherwise. Such translation may be done by verbatim or in sentence by sentence. The use of the translation was essential for teaching Greek and Latin in the 18th and 19th centuries AD (Adegoriola 2005: 331). Similarly to the case Arabic studies, especially in traditional Islamic schools in Malaysia. Most religious teachers use translation methods to conduct their teaching. Apart from the lack of natural resources in the Malay language, translation methods become so important to convey the teaching because it is based on religious texts that requires efficiency and high language skills to understand its content.

Translation in Language's Teaching and Learning: Translation method has the educational and scientific impact and enjoyable cognitive exercise. For those who learn a foreign language, they cannot avoid the translation practical that helped them to know the difference between mother tongue and foreign language learning (Matar et al. 1981: *Intro*). This implies that, translation is a common phenomenon that occurs when two languages must meet for a particular purpose, especially the teaching and learning of languages.

According to al-Khuli (1982), in the translation method, the mother tongue is fully utilized with regard to the laws of grammar and how to analyze it. This means, first language must first be mastered by the learner in the process of teaching a second language to students. Similarly, students must already have a background which they are well versed in their first language. So the translation method for acquiring a new language can be applied.

Grammar and Translation methods used in teaching Arabic as well known as the traditional method (*al-Tariqa al-Qadima*). Ahmad Kilani (2001: 30) has described this method having the following characteristics:

1. This method emphasizes skills in reading, writing and translation,
2. The use of the mother tongue as a medium of teaching foreign languages,

3. A strong emphasis on grammar aspects as an important way of teaching foreign languages,

4. Teachers used the example of certain verses to be used as specified by the students in terms of grammar.

While Azman (2012) suggested translation should be a part of knowledge for teachers when they are teaching adult learners. However, there are many advantages and disadvantages in using this method for teaching and learning languages. Nevertheless, this method is very effective if it is used with regard to the appropriate context as learning objectives, targets students and language family variation.

Study carried out by Uzawa (1996) showed that translation tasks may be useful for second language learning because of the second language learners' frequent attention to language use during translating processes. However, if learning a language is intended to understand scientific texts or literature, so the use of translation method will be effective. These are because a lot of words or terms used in the source language must be understood and homologized in the target language.

While the appropriate students those recommended to use this method are adults or students who have already mastered their first language well. Translation method will be able to give an explanation that can be described and understood through their first language. The advantage is that when students can compare the similarities or differences in the source language and the target language. This notion also supported by the finding by Laufer and Girsai (2008) when they found CAT (contrastive analysis + translation) is helpful for student to acquire vocabulary of foreign language.

If the languages are not similar to each other's, while the source language is foreign and difficult to be experienced in real situations, the translation method is totally necessary. Such as Arabic (Semitic) to Malay (Austronesian) are two different language families and backgrounds. Furthermore, to gain experience of the language in Malaysia is very difficult compared with the English language. Therefore the translation method is suitable for the purpose of teaching Arabic as a foreign language. According to the study by Niño (2009) the use of MT (Machine Translation)[1] and free online MT in foreign language learning was perceived as an innovative and positive learning experience both by language tutors and language learners.

b. *Translation Disadvantages*

Even the translation method is suitable for use in language learning, but if the instructional objective is for communication skills then this method is considered less effective. The main factor is because the translation method requires time and does not help students mastering the use of the language being taught. In addition, the translation method

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[1] Normally students will use Machine Translation (MT) in their foreign language writing and translation assignments.

will also slow down the process of acquisition of the style and structure of the foreign language when a first language is tied frequently in use.

If the target students were the children, then the translation method should not be suggested. The main reason is because the students of this group is still in the process of first language acquisition with the sense they have yet to master any of the language well. Therefore, it is better not to use the translation method, but using other methods is more effective.

If the thought language came from the same family such as the Malay and Indonesian so there is no need to use translation method. Instead the emphases on other aspects need to be considered as a reference to the style and choice of words or terms used in both languages. Similarly, such different language backgrounds but are often used widely in the environment sphere. Teaching English, Mandarin and Tamil in Malaysia for example are inappropriate to use full translation method for teaching and learning.

Translation Function in Language Acquisition: As frequently explained, the translation is the process of rewriting (Levere, 1992) in a language to another language. During the translation process, several important things in both languages must be given attention as aspects of morphology, syntax, semantics and symbols (written language).

According to Norhaili and Ramiaida (2008: 284), while students perform translation activities, they are not aware that they are conducting three important processes in learning, namely; analyze, transfer and rebuild. In the analysis phase, the translator will analyze the characteristics of morphology, syntax and semantics of the target language. At this stage they learn and know the level of their ability in a second language. Indirectly they can fix this by training more often. At this stage of the removal and reconstruction of the target language sentence structure, translator again can train their psychomotor skills. As Belam (2003) argued that post-editing (of translation) can serve as a complement to language tuition for it makes the students focus on analyzing the source text, thus learning new vocabulary, expressions, grammar points and stylistic aspects.

From the practical aspects in foreign language classes for communication, quick translation may be used either as an explanation or even in training. As mentioned by Newmark (1995: 283), native language translations of foreign speech are useful to consolidate and test the language taught or written. In this context it can also be concluded that the experience in the first language can be used to assist in the acquisition of a second language as it was called by Lado (1980: 53): "*Because of all the experience left an impression in storage memory, it may be assumed that all knowledge of the past was a factor in learning a second language.*" Based on this discussion, this study was carried out to achieve two main objectives, firstly is to examine students of Arabic learner's translation from Arabic language to Malay language as their mother tongue and secondly is to analyze common errors faced during translation process.

Methodology: This study used descriptive and inductive methods of analysis. By mid-semester exam paper in first semester amounted to 105 scripts, researchers have made some analysis to assess strategies and skills that students learn the Arabic language through translation methods.

While the objective of teaching Arabic at UiTM intended for communication skills, but the translation method applied in matters that require translation. This means that the translation method is not a merely traditional method and not practical anymore. But it also helps Arabic students in enrich their understanding to master the Arabic language. This is because the students can be considered as mature students who have mastered one or two languages previously. This study has several limitations as follows:

a. *Respondent:* Respondent's selection was not based on the entire population of students who took the Arabic language on this semester. Instead it was the selection that has been determined by the assessment itself and also compliance with the objective of this study. These students were taking Arabic at diploma level II only. This selection factors caused by the respondents already have experience in Arabic at the first stage in the previous semester.

b. *Research Item:* Mid-semester exam paper written on the question of translation of Arabic to Malay which has 5 questions that must be answered without option. However, in this study only one question is selected for analysis and discussion. (See appendix A).

c. *Variable:* The aim of this study focused on four main elements to assess students' ability to render the verse given in the Malay language into Arabic, namely:

1. Vocabulary performance
2. Grammatical structure
3. First language interference
4. The use of the Arabic graphology

Therefore, based on these variables, researcher has developed a conceptual framework for this study as shown below:
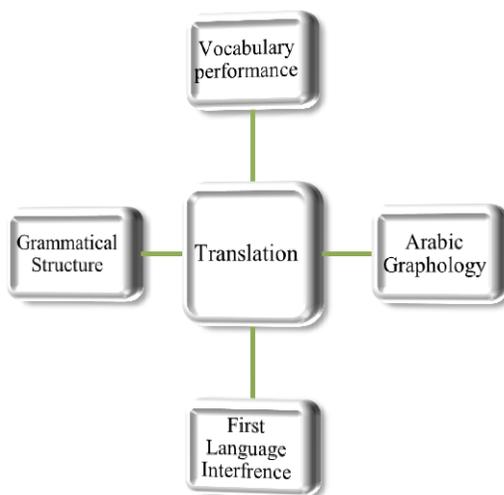
Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

Findings and Discussion: Before discussing the findings, the researcher would like to exhibit the data (questions) used for the test. There were 5 questions that used for the purposes of Arabic Malay translation:

1. His mother was a housewife
2. Fast Nabil oh! Taxi had arrived.
3. Thanks for the help of the body (L).
4. Bicycles were worth three hundred dollars.
5. Fatimah was waiting for his friend (P) at the airport.

However, to meet the needs of this article by looking to the limitation, the researcher only described translation of the first questions; [His mother was a housewife] and in accordance with the appropriate answer to the Arabic translation is: أمه ربة البيت /والدته. The general findings have shown this result:

Table 1: Findings of an Analysis

No	Variable	Frequency (Correct)	Frequency (Error)
1	Vocabulary performance	92.4%	7.6
2	Grammatical structure	66.67%	33.33
3	First language interference	100%	-
4	The use of the Arabic graphology	69.53%	30.47

For further discussion, following paragraphs will reveal the detail of the findings:

a. *Vocabulary:* This weakness is detected when students do not use the right words to translate the words of original text. For such, word ربة البيت replaced with بيت الطلبة. In addition, the inability of students to present the equivalent Malay word of expected Arabic

word as a weakness of vocabulary acquisition. Despite of this, vocabulary weakness aspects are only marginally to 7.6% of the total sample. This result implies that respondents of the study have relatively a good level of vocabulary. That is because students who master the four basic skills in language, namely listening, speaking, reading and writing skills are those students who are able to master the basic vocabulary in the target language (Abd. Aziz Abd. Talib, 2000). Therefore vocabulary acquisition must be enhanced through two main processes of teaching and learning outside or in the classroom.

b. *Grammatical Structure:* Despite of having appropriate vocabulary, but the drawback correct sentence structure in accordance with the formula for Arabic grammar is a problem. Grammatical meaning of the text in the context of this study is the choice of pronouns like ـه and ـها as well as the other pronouns. It is feminine and masculine gender conformity.

In addition, the disadvantages of using a marker *alif* and *lām* identified as a weakness of grammatical sentences. Use markers *alif* and *lām* on the meaning of the word بيت required for housewives, but there are students who ignore it. Likewise, if the marker is not necessary, no one uses such as الأمه should be grammatically أمه.

Indeed, it can be clearly identified that weakness in constructing grammatical sentences is a major factor that contributed to the failure of students to translate accurately. Number of students who have this drawback is of 33.33%. This result as well supported previous studies that grammar structure is the main problem faced by Arabic learners through the years. For instance, studies by Mat Taib (2006) and Ismail (2005) demonstrated such important aspects (eg. gender, tenses, number and flexes are the most complicated parts in Arabic grammar) as posing major barriers to students' learning or Arabic sentence structure. While Azman and Goh (2010) have proven that grammatical structure of both Arabic and Mandarin share a same level of difficulties and their expectation is very high to have a crucial attention by their instructors.

c. *First Language Interference:* Language interference may happen at various levels including phonological, grammatical, lexical and orthographical (Berthold, Mangubhai & Batorowicz, 1997). Based on the finding by (Bhela, 1999), language interference occurs on the syntactic structure of a written task of a second language learner.

In this study, researcher has determined two levels, namely lexical and grammatical. At the lexical level, borrowing of words from one language and converting them to sound more natural in another. In the same time, students are expecting them as correct by Malay grammar.

While at the grammatical level, the structure is designed in the pattern of Malay language sentence. However, based on samples that were examined for the first question, the researcher did not find any indication that there are students who are influenced by their native language when translating Malay sentences into Arabic. But in the remaining questions, the researchers believe there are also students who are affected by the vocabulary and style of the first language in the Malay translation Arabic.

d. *Arabic graphology:* There are students who still have not really mastered the Arabic script even though they had passed the first stage of the Arabic language in the previous semester. This factor is also significant because the number of those who have these drawbacks totaled 30.47% of the overall sample. The researcher does not mean poor utilization Arab graphology as writing a dirty or not according to the standard deviation of *khat* (Islamic fine art). Instead, this weakness is considered from every aspect of spelling words. Most of these spelling mistakes occur in the word ربة البيت. Most students who have not mastered the Arabic graphology will easily make mistakes. For example, the word is written as: ربتول بيت.

This could be caused by reason they know the words and their meanings, as well as pronunciation. But their weakness in Arabic character leads them to be misspelled. In fact, there are mistakes in using *tā'* and *alif lām*. For example, there are students who use *tā' maftūhah* for the word ربة as ربت and *alif lām* as ول which should be attended by ال.

Conclusion and Recommendation: Significantly, the research on students' answer scripts from translation section provides some information that can assist in the teaching of Arabic language communication. However if students with high levels of Arabic proficiency from other educational back- grounds are studied, the result may get a different picture.

If we considered the aspects of vocabulary based on the analysis above, not many of the students facing the problems. On average they know the words given are related with a matter of daily routine. Even if there are problems, it was because the vocabulary is seemed to be similar with the other words that have the same sound. It was also be found mostly retort students use words والدة and أم to translate the word 'mother' in the Malay language.

Grammatical aspects also contribute to the students' ability to translate accurately. In the analysis presented, there are still students who do not efficiently use pronouns agreement to the masculine or feminine gender. This is no doubt due to differences in the mother tongue of students which does not have such formula. However, this drawback can be overcome if instructor has continuous training with practical examples for communication.

The last issue here is the challenge of using Arabic graphology. Apparently to researchers, the Arabic graphologies are not as complicated as kanji character Japanese or Chinese language. Even worst was that they did not know the specific letter. Their weaknesses are to distinguish the phonetic aspect between the same letters. This matter must be addressed clearly in order to enhance the students' abilities in Arabic graphology use along with the oral skills as their primary objective of learning. From communicative perspective, using transliteration for learners of Arabic may help them to gain confident especially to acquire a new vocabulary (Azman & Ahmad Nazuki, 2010). Looking into this weakness, it worth noting here that students need to be exposed to calligraphy art. Even there is no requirement to hire a calligrapher, instructors may find it is possible to offer an activities related to writing skills such as how to connect one alphabet to another. By giving

several goods calligraphy art exposure, students might be taught implicitly how to construct an appropriate word or words.

Generally, Malay to Arabic translation skills is important in the process of teaching the Arabic language communication. The purpose of communication is to make students actively produce language to communicate. Translation approach from the 'in to out' (Malay to Arabic) is a cognitive activity that requires students to use their creativity to express something by using a foreign language they are learning. This idea is supported by Azman et al. (2011: 535) in their study on using translation strategy among 60 samples of student who respond a positive feedback.

From the aspect of the textbooks preparation, one part for translation exercise should be provided. This translation must provide extensive exercise to students in terms of respected vocabulary, grammar sturcture and different of the target language grammar apart of first language. Similarly, Arabic calligraphy skills already are exposed with brief exercises at the end of each topic in the last page. Teachers also need to provide incentives for the students who are proficient in Arabic calligraphy as it is also part of the visual arts heritage of Islamic civilization.

However, these skills must be constantly monitored by teachers so that students do not only independently produce language, even the right way according to the grammar of the language and the rules should be. Adult students for college or higher learning institution students must have to be exposed to the techniques and skills to train them to use the foreign language they are learning in a creative way.

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