

An Investigation on the Relationship between the Grammatical Competence of Young Iranian English Translation Students and their Ability to Translate from English to Farsi

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Abstract

Today, everything has changed and this has brought a need for learning a second language. Most countries across the world use English as their second/foreign language and the fundamental part of this process is grammar, i.e., the combination of sound, structure, and meaning system of language. A sentence can be composed of several words, clauses, as well as grammatical rules. These grammatical rules should be learned efficiently as they may make a sentence meaningfully different. Hence, the main concern of this study was to find out whether there was any relationship between the grammatical competence and translation ability. To this end, the OPT and translation tests were administered to 64 young students who studied English translation at Islamic Azad University (Qaemshahr branch). The findings showed that the correlation coefficient between OPT and translation scores was .92 at significance value of $P \leq .01$, which implies a high level of reliability. The results showed a positive relationship between the grammatical competence and translation ability; in other words, those with higher OPT score demonstrate better on translation test than the others.

Keywords: Grammatical competence, Young English translation students, Translation ability.

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1. Introduction

Grammar is important, but what makes it possible for us to use it in real life communicative situations is an ability called competence. It was the term established by the American linguist Noam Chomsky (1965) for whom it is the ability enables one to speak and understand their first language appropriately without the need to think about it.

According to Richards and Renandya (2002) "grammar in the early part of the twentieth century played an important role and was an essential part of language instruction, so that no attention was paid to other aspects of language learning as they were either ignored or downplayed" (p.145). It was assumed that if one knew the grammatical rules of the language, one would be able to use it for communication. So, grammatical competence was considered to be one part of communicative competence.

However, the emphasis on grammar was changed with the emergence of Communicative Language Teaching CLT in the early 1970s. The proponents of CLT argued that grammatical competence is only one part of communicative competence.

By the early 1980s, grammar had lost its dominance, especially in Britain and the United States. There were a number of factors involved in the decline of grammar including the basic changes in attitudes toward the language, as the consequences of social changes. As Richard Lanham (1974) argues in his book *Style: An Anti-Textbook*, "You cannot teach as duty what society does not feel a duty" (p.25)

On the other hand, it is obvious that those who speak the same language are able to communicate directly with one another because they know the grammar system of that language and this system seems to be the rules of making meaning. But those who do not speak the same language need to learn the grammar of that language in order to be able to communicate or translate the sentences. So, making a meaningful sentence basically cannot be achieved unless the sounds of words, the meanings of those words as well as different ways of putting words together are recognized.

Newmark (1988) in his book *"A Textbook of Translation"* defines translation as the communication of a source-language text meaning using a target language. Sentence is the product of a series of interpretive operations whose final achievement is translation. According to Nida (1976) "translation is a process in which a person who knows both the source language and the receptor language, decodes the message of the source language and encodes it into an appropriate form of receptor language" (p.14).

Accordingly, translation plays an important role in global communication. It can acquaint the target language readers with cultural features of the source text. Many centuries ago, translation was in central attention but today its evolution has taken on a new direction.

Although mental translating can be useful in the early and consolidation stage of FL learning (Pickett, 1978), today seems most researchers are on consensus that translation, particularly mental translation, cannot be considered to be a good way of learning second language acquisition and the best way to teach grammar can be through contextualizing, order of presentation, use of terminology, degree of explicitness, linking grammar and vocabulary (Hedge, 2006).

But the role of translation in development of nations and its impact on comparative literature, communicative approach, clinical trials and many other fields cannot be ignored. How can we learn more about the latest-of-the-art technologies, if there is no translation to convey the pieces of information? No progress can be facilitated without translation. Considering the importance of translation in our daily life, and the role of conveying meaning in this regard, it has received scant attention from teachers and learners.

The main objective of this research was to find how grammatical competence can be related to learners' ability in translating English texts into Farsi and to determine whether efforts to gather grammatical competence data will bring significant new insights over the importance of the role grammar in translation.

According to Education First's English Proficiency Index 2012, although Iran showed low proficiency level in EF EPI rankings, it was the best scoring country in Middle East & North Africa gaining the rank of 28 and the score of 52.92. Hence, in Latin America and the Middle East, Argentina and Iran scored the highest. According to Education First's English Proficiency Index 2012, these results show that an adequate level of English cannot be attained with inadequate general education. Such an international testing of English proficiency provides an opportunity not only for a comparative measure of different education systems and their effectiveness but also for an opportunity to encourage discussion of learning goals and evaluation standards.

2. Research question

Scrutinizing the linguistic and non-linguistic factors which are more related to translation ability, the following research question can be formulated:

- Is there any relationship between the grammatical competence of senior Iranian English translation students and their ability to translate from English to Farsi?

3. Hypothesis

Based on the research question, the following null hypothesis will be proposed;

There is no relationship between the grammatical competence of senior Iranian English translation students and their ability to translate from English to Farsi.

4. Review of literature

Grammar and translation are the focal points of English language teaching (Krishnaswamy and Sriraman, 1995). There are many definitions; the term “grammar of English” however, is still ambiguous. Guldal & Otnes (2011) refer to one ‘wide’ and one ‘narrow’ meaning. According to Timmis (2012) the second language learning is a complex process, and many regard learning a language as almost synonymous with learning its grammar (Timmis, 2012). Researchers agree on the fact that grammar is crucial for language learning, as well as being an important factor for acquiring knowledge about the language (Crystal, 2003, Lightbown, 2000, Timmis, 2012). There are many definitions about the grammar. One of them is what David Crystal provides in a simple definition “the business of taking a language to pieces, to see how it works” (Crystal, 2003, p. 10). Competence is “a combination of knowledge, skills attitudes, values and behaviors” (Council of Europe 2005, p.2). It cannot be observed directly but it can be inferred to some extent from the performance (Gonczi, 1993). According to Bachman (1990) the communicative language ability consists of language competence, strategic competence, and psychophysiological mechanisms. Nassaji (1999, 2000) suggests that focus on form can be obtained either through process or design. “Focus on form through process occurs in the context of natural communication when both the teacher and the learner's primary focus are on meaning. Focus on form through design is deliberate and is achieved through designing tasks which have deliberate explicit focus” (p.392).

The English term translation first introduced around 1340. Since there are different meanings we can say that translation is a process of transferring the meaning of original written text of L1 to L2. “The process of translation between two different written language involves the translator changing an original written text (the source text or ST) into a written text (the target text or TT) in a different verbal language (the target language or TT).” (Jeremy Munday, 2001.p.5).

In a study by Sakurai (2015) on Japanese students the effect of a decrease in translation on the number of words read, reading comprehension, and reading rate in an extensive reading program was studied. The results derived from regression analyses showed that a decrease in grammar analyses and translation significantly

affected words read, reading comprehension, and reading rate. It was found that a decrease in translation at the word level was statistically significant on reading comprehension. Everyone has the competence needed to learn a new task and grammatical competence seems to be one of the "sub-competences" (PACTE group 2005, p.611) needed to translate the texts.

Second language acquisition has placed much emphasis on the constructs of attention (Zyzik & Polio, 2008). For that people in worldwide investigated in a variety of empirical studies in laboratory settings.

According to Nassaji and Fotos (2011) the key components of processing instruction as a pedagogical intervention are providing learners with information about the target linguistic form or structure and informed them of the input processing strategies that may negatively affect their processing of the target structure (p.24).

Fitiria (2012) studied the relationship between young students' grammatical ability and students' translating skill from English into Bahasa Indonesia. The results show that the increasing or decreasing score of translating skill can be predicted by the score of grammatical ability. It was concluded that the grammatical ability gives significant contribution to the translating skill.

5. Methodology

This study was conducted at the Islamic Azad University of Qaemshahr on as the current research probed the potential relationship between the grammatical competence of Iranian young English translation students and their ability to translate from English to Farsi, the method employed here was a Correlational ex post facto study. The framework of this study was underpinned by a quantitative research using descriptive and inferential statistics.

6. Sample and Participants

Almost all young English translation students who studied English translation at the Islamic Azad University of Qaemshahr comprised the sample of this study. The senior English translation students were those who studied English translation at the University of Qaemshahr, during the periods from October 2013 to June 2017. They were in the fourth and final year of study and supposed to obtain the acceptable scores in an OPT test ranging from 37 to 60 (from upper intermediate level to very advanced English level).

Because of convenient accessibility and proximity, the convenient sampling was used to recruit eligible individuals. The sample of this study consisted of 64 young

English translation students ranging from 21 to 24 selected from 70 participants who were previously selected through administrating Oxford Placement Test.

7. Procedure

The research participants (sample), of this study, were among young English translation students who studied English translation at the Islamic Azad University of Qaemshahr. As the proficiency tests are norm-referenced and are intended to “measure global language abilities” (Brown, 2005, p.2), first the OPT test was used to measure the level of proficiency of learners. The scores obtained from the OPT test, which were to range from 37 to 47, were applied to decide on the participants of the study. The utilization of pre-group preparation was supposed to be necessary before administrating the test to the main group who already obtained the acceptable level of proficiency.

Because of the complexity of rating translation texts and measuring ability, there was a need to establish a pretest group before working on the main group as a sample of the current study. To this end, the researcher took OPT test to homogenize the sample, selecting 64 participants according to their scores. On the next phase, one translation text including 191 words (based on Katharina Reiss holistic items selected from B2 - Upper Intermediate text level taken from www.TeachYa.com which was closely parallel to the OPT level) was given to participants in order to determine some possible grammatical errors or problems related to the transferring the constructions.

The item considered as holistic one to help researcher to better interpret the text and rate process as well as find and predict the problem spots. The results derived from the pretest group used as a criteria to rate the main group. After administrating the translation texts, two trained raters rated the translations. The correlation between two variables, then, helped to show if there was any relationship between the grammatical competence of English translation students and their ability to translate from English to Farsi.

8. Instrumentation

The Oxford Placement Test (OPT), version I, and a researcher-made translation test were used in this study as the research instruments.

The Oxford Placement Test (OPT) is a multiple choice test with 60 items which targets mainly lexis and syntax. It distinguishes the following proficiency levels:

1-17 Beginner

18-27 Elementary

28-36 Lower-intermediate

37-47 Upper-intermediate

48-55 Advanced

56-60 Very advance

It was also used to screen participants and measure as well as determine the participants' level of general English language proficiency including linguistic ability. Using the OPT test, the sample were homogenized and prepared to take the test for the next phase. The assessment of this test was to consider the correct answer. If each item was correctly answered, students would obtain a score of 37-47.

The translation test, on the other hand, was the test of the ability to translate texts in essay forms.

The text was taken from TeachYa.com , a site where teachers and students can find high-quality and FREE websites for learning English. This online site categorizes the best materials according to level and language area, from beginner, to intermediate, upper intermediate and advanced level. It is also a partner of Lewis School of English which located in Palmerston Road, Southampton ,UK. For this study the B2 - Upper Intermediate text level was selected which is closely parallel to the OPT level. The text consisted of a single paragraph of English text that was to be translated into Farsi. The assessment of this test was based on the accuracy of transferring messages from source language (SL) to target language (TL), including the accuracy of grammatical aspects.

The score of each sentence ranged from 2 to 2.5 based on grammatical complexity which was rated earlier by three trained raters. If the text was translated comprehensively and was successful to transfer messages from SL to TL, students would obtain a score of 20. Moreover, the criteria of the assessment of this test were:

18-20 = very good translation (advanced and very advanced)

15-17.5 = good translation (upper-intermediate)

13-14.5 = adequate translation (lower-intermediate)

11-12.5 = less translation (elementary)

9-10.5 = bad translation (beginner)

9. Data analysis

In this study, there were two independent variables, the grammatical competence as one independent variable and the translating ability as another independent variable. The scale was interval and Pearson correlation was the best method to find if there was

any relationship between the grammatical competence of EFL senior learners and their ability to translate from English to Farsi.

First the inter-rater reliability analysis statistic was used in order to determine whether there is a consistency among raters, then the normality of OPT score and the normality of translation score were explored in order to decide on the type of tests to use for the analysis. The Normal Q-Q Plot of OPT scores and Detrended Normal Q-Q Plot were also used to test the homogeneity of slopes.

In analyzing data to test the hypothesis, the researchers used the descriptive correlation method based on Pearson's r correlation coefficient to analyze the relationship between two continuous variables. In calculating the data, SPSS 16 program was applied to help the process.

10. Results

10.1 Inter-Rater Reliability

After administrating the OPT test and analyzing the data derived from, the participants were given the translation test to discover if there is any relationship between the grammatical competence of young English translation students and their ability to translate from English to Farsi. The results of translation test were rated by two independent trained raters. In order to determine whether there was a consistency among raters, an inter-rater reliability analysis statistic was performed to assess the level of agreement among them (Table 1).

Table 1. Inter-rater analysis results for translation tests

Inter-rater reliability			
		Translation1	Translation2
Translation1	Pearson Correlation	1	.860**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	64	64
Translation2	Pearson Correlation	.860**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	64	64

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As the findings in Table 1 suggest, the inter-rater reliability for the raters is found to be $r=.860$ ($P<0.01$) which means that there is a homogeneity in the ratings given by raters, and also there is a significant consistency between the two raters. The Significant level in this study (Sig. = .000; the p-value is below the .0.01) shows that

there is a significant relationship between two sets of translation scores rated by two trained raters.

10.2. Tests of Normality

In order to decide on the type of tests to use for analyses, the normality of the each set of the obtained data had to be determined. Accordingly, assessing whether data are normally distributed or not, both graphical and statistical techniques were employed. First, normality of OPT score was explored (Table 2).

Table 2. Test of Normality of OPT score

Tests of Normality						
	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
OPT score	.177	64	.085	.895	64	.056

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

The null hypothesis of normality tests holds that there is no significant difference between the population and the sample. As the findings in Table 2 show, the significance is greater than 0.05 which means that data is not different from normal. Since the p value is greater than 0.05 level, the frequency of distribution is not significantly deviated from normality. The null hypothesis for the total results was not rejected. In other words, there was not a significant difference between the sample and the population for the total results: the OPT data were normally distributed.

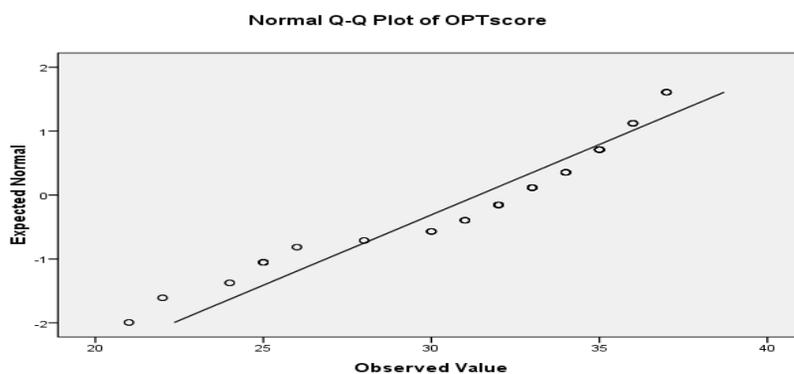


Figure 1. Normal Q-Q Plot of OPT Score

The Normal Q-Q Plot of OPT scores were used to test the homogeneity of slopes. As the Q-Q plots display the observed values against normally distributed data, the Normal Q-Q Plot of OPT scores was used to compare the observed quantiles of the data with the expected quantiles. It can be seen from the figure that the normally distributed data falls along the line. The circles around the line depict the observed quantiles of data. A visual inspection of the data indicated that there were minor departures from normality due to a few extreme scores.

After using the Normal Q-Q Plot of OPT scores, it was to calculate each circle to find if the data were normal by subtracting the expected quantile from the observed quantile.

The next step was to explore the normality of the translation score (Table 3).

Table 3. Test of normality for translation

Tests of Normality						
	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Translation	.175	64	.075	.928	64	.065

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

As the findings in Table 3 show, the sig of Kolmogorov-Smirnov is greater than 0.05 (.075 > 0.05) and so is the sig of Shapiro-Wilk (065 > 0.05) which indicate that data were not different from normal and it was as much as normal of 64. So, it can be concluded from the p value which is greater than 0.05 level that the frequency of distribution is not significantly deviated from normality. In other words, the translation scores were also normally distributed.

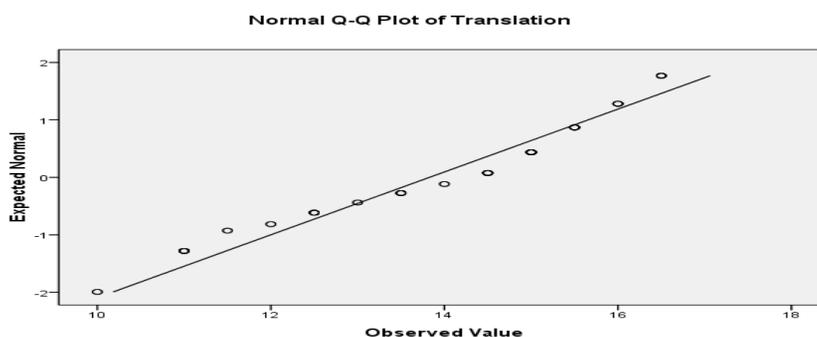


Figure 2. Normal Q-Q Plot of Translation

Figure 2 plots the corresponding estimates if the underlying distribution is either exponential, uniform, or normal. The Normal Q-Q Plot of OPT scores was used to test the homogeneity of slopes. As the Q-Q plots display the observed values against normally distributed data, The Normal Q-Q Plot of translation scores was used to compare the observed quantiles of the data with the expected quantiles we supposed to be in translation. It can be seen from the graph that the normally distributed data falls along the line. The circles around the line depict the observed quantiles of data. A visual inspection of the data indicated that there were minor departures from normality due to a few extreme scores.

As findings from the normal Q-Q plot suggest, the translations were well approximated by a normal distribution, indicating that the least squares algorithm of the errors were efficient and resulted in an approximately minimum variance estimate.

10.3. Research question

The research question was directed at examining the relationship between independent variables, the grammatical competence and translation ability. The hypothesis reads that there exists a relationship between grammatical competence of young Iranian English translation students and their ability to translate from English to Farsi.

In order to test the above-mentioned null hypothesis, and considering the fact that both sets of data were found to be normally distributed, Pearson correlation was employed to test the strength of the relationship (Tables 4 & 5).

Table 4. Descriptive statistics

Descriptive Statistics			
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
OPT score	31.4062	4.54158	64
Translation	13.8281	1.82839	64

As the outcome of Table 4 shows, the standard deviation for the OPT test is 4.54158, which is higher than the standard deviation for the translation test, 1.82839. On the other hand, the mean for the OPT test is 31.4062, which is higher than the mean for the translation test, 13.8281. All these results suggest that students with higher grammatical competence reached higher score in OPT than the others. In other words, those with higher OPT score demonstrate better on translation test than the others.

Table 5. Correlation between OPT score and Translation

Correlations		OPT score	Translation
OPT score	Pearson Correlation	1	.926**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	64	64
Translation	Pearson Correlation	.926**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	64	64

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

According to the results of Table 5, the correlation coefficient is ($r=.926$) at the significance value of ($P\leq.01$). Therefore the null hypothesis of the study is rejected. There is a relationship between grammatical competence of young Iranian English translation students and their ability to translate from English to Farsi.

11. Conclusion and Discussion

The current research tried to determine whether there is any relationship between the grammatical competence and translation ability of young Iranian English translation students. The result of the data analysis concluded that there is a relationship between the grammatical competence of young Iranian English translation students and their ability to translate from English to Farsi. The closer the absolute value is to 1, the stronger the relationship, so, it can be concluded from the value of .92 that there is highly significant correlation between grammatical competence and translation ability of young Iranian English translation students.

Furthermore, as the correlation has two dimensions, the direction of the correlation is indicated by the sign of the correlation. The positive correlation of this study indicates that as one variable increases, the other variable also increases. The greater the grammatical competence, the greater the translation ability.

It is obvious that everyone has the competence needed to learn a new task and grammatical competence, the knowledge of language code (Widdowson, 1978; Canale & Swain, 1980, 1983; Bachman, 1990), seems to be one of the "sub-competences" (PACTE group 2005, p.611) needed to translate the texts.

The importance of communicative competence in learning a second/foreign language, can be seen in other studies carried out by Savignon (1972), Canale and Swain (1981) and Bachmann (1990). The findings of the present study are also in line with the findings of previous studies by Thomas and Collier's (1997), Nassaji and

Swain (2000), Fitiria ,(2012), and Ishag Adam Shatta (2008). All showed that the overall quality of learners' grammatical knowledge acts as the most influential tool in assessing communicative tasks.

However, there is some evidence suggesting that the correlation between grammatical competence and pragmatic competence is weak (Mojabi, 2014) as grammatical competence does not imply pragmatic competence and those who are grammatically advanced do not necessarily have high pragmatic competence (Rose & Kasper, 2001; Barron, 2003). Interestingly, the findings of this study were not in line with those finding and proved that there was a significant relationship between grammatical competence and translation ability because of several studies in this regard. According to Miller (2004), the effect of linguistic competence on performance on all theory of mind tasks is likely to be affected by the linguistic complexity of the theory of mind task itself. The result was consistent with that of Miller (2004) proving that there is a relationship between grammatical competence and translating performance. The findings of the study demonstrated the power of grammar. So, the language teachers are practically required to pay more attention to grammar in context rather than asking young students to look up each word in a dictionary to translate the text. In order to promote the translation ability, the grammatical ability should be improved, enhanced and healed comprehensively in the context because lexicons are like bricks and grammar is like cement that binds those simple and solid pieces together to form larger structures. It also reminds language teachers to provide students with new possibilities and encourage them to be self-regulated learners as translation need not be confined to literature... to increase the students' power and range of expression." "translation will certainly do this" (Doff, 1988, p.6-7), and ensure that the young students have already had the linguistic knowledge, both theoretical and practical, with a wide cultural bilingual background (Kusssmaul, 1995; Venuti, 1995) needed to be a good translator.

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