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Effects of Using Culture-laden Texts on Culture-specific Translation Skills in Arab Students

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Abstract

This study explores the possibility of translating culture-laden texts from English into Arabic, relying on a corpus of literary texts representing the local cultures of the 16th and the 18th century England. This study taps into the applicability of SL cultural texts to help students appropriately render a culture-specific lexicon. The study makes use of an experimental research design to check whether the use of literary texts may help EFL learners enhance their culture-specific translation skills in a traditional instruction setting. Findings indicate that the use of culture-laden literary texts can be efficient in introducing the culturally loaded lexicon of the English language, thereby inducing improvements in translational writing skills of EFL learners of translation.

Introduction & Background

Translation theorists have noted an interwoven relationship between the language and culture, maintaining that translation is a process of intercultural exchange. Hermans believes that translation should be recognized as a cultural practice. Of relevance, too, Gerding-Salas is of the view that the main aim of translation is to serve as a cross-cultural bilingual communication vehicle among people of different tongues and cultures. As the question of intercultural translation has received a plethora of attention in current socio-linguistic theory as well as in translation studies, some authors, such as Bahameed and Badawi maintain that translation has the potential to foster intercultural understanding. Therefore, researchers and theorists in translation studies advocate a cultural approach to translation rather than maintaining a solely linguistic approach.

This approach entails, as Pena suggests, that cultural equivalence should be given due importance in the process of translation so that both language and culture can be given due consideration in the act of translation to avoid communication pitfalls and misinterpreted messages that may result from intercultural misunderstandings (1255). In this regard, Lotman's theory states that

No language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture; and no culture can exist which does not have at its centre, the structure of natural language. Language, then, is the heart within the body of culture, and it is the interaction between the two that results in the continuation of life-energy. In the same way that the surgeon, operating on the heart, cannot neglect the body that surrounds it, so the translator treats the text in isolation from the culture at his peril. (Bassnett 14).

Therefore, language functions as a means of communication, yet it should be utilised in the context of its corresponding culture. As Bassnett explicated in *Translation Studies*,

there is an inseparable interrelatedness and an essential interdependence between language and culture as illustrated in the above metaphor.

Furthermore, Savory asserts that rendition can occur easily and communicatively by adopting an equivalent of the thoughts and underpinnings that the different lexical and structural idioms assume. Likewise, Nida and Taber believe that the process of translation consists of reproducing in the translation language the "closest natural equivalent" of the source language message, firstly in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style – a process that requires a rewriting of discourse in the style and culture of the translation language (12). According to Nida,

[...] a 'gloss translation' mostly typifies formal equivalence where form and content are reproduced as faithfully as possible and the TL reader is able to "understand as much as he can of the customs, manner of thought, and means of expression" of the SL context (129).

Therefore, the aim of transferring "an understanding to people in their own language and create the same impact as the original text" (Galibert 1) hypothetically requires that translation be considered as "the process of establishing equivalence between the source language texts and target language texts" (Sa'edi 242).

As of late, there is a paucity of research attention paid to translating culture-laden features of the source language into the translation language. In fact, idioms and expressions laden with cultural content are hard to render. Therefore, several authors such as Woolsey, Rees, Beichman, Venuti, Cook-Sather and others indicated that literal translation has been favoured for teaching language and literature since long. This genre of translation is grounded in dictionary work, sentence and short text processing that is approached oftentimes by grammar and lexicon work, drilling, practicing and modelling.

Problem of the Study

Translating culture-laden discourse raises potentially problematic difficulties for student translators at colleges of languages and translation. Therefore, the present study seeks to recognise the effects of employing culture-laden content in literary discourse from different excerpts of English literature of 16th and 18th century England - particularly idioms and collocations of literary discourse in translation training materials on developing their cultural/linguistic decoding skills in EFL learners and for identifying their translational writing strategies upon rendering this type of discourse. The research question that the present study sought to answer is as follows: How effective is a training course grounded in culture-laden lexicon in helping translation students to render culture-laden literary discourse?

Methodology

Participants

Participants were 51 EFL learners assigned to an experimental group and a control group. The students in both groups were equated on such factors as language proficiency, demographics and their academic achievement based on information provided by the academic advisor with regard to their GPAs.

Instrumentation: Culture-specific Discourse Test

The researchers selected a set of 4 literary discourse pieces from culturally-loaded literary texts modelling the material covered in class training. The idioms and collocations in the translation literary excerpts were not actually taught during coursework prior to the experiment, but reproducing similar strategies of translating cultural content.

Procedures

Students in the control group studied Translation III in a traditional fashion of Islamic and literary texts assignments for translation in the class and at home, with the effort being mostly on the part of the learners. The experimental group learners studied a specially designed course involving culture-specific literary texts from the 16th century Shakespearean drama and the 18th century British fiction. Though similar texts were also used with the two groups, emphasis was laid on cultural translation strategies with the experimental group.

Towards the end of the semester, participants in the two groups took the same test during lecture time, two grades were assigned to each culture-laden piece of discourse: one mark for the correct translation of the word (comprehension of lexicon) and another for correct cultural rendering of the entire excerpt (cultural translation). Furthermore, the two researchers marked the tests for both groups. Disagreement about scoring occurred only in a few instances of 'approximate' cultural translations in the test. However, the inter-rater reliability was 0.91.

Results

Considering the *t*-values in *Table 1*, readers can detect significant differences between both experimental and control groups of the study in the comprehension of and further appropriate cultural rendering of the idioms and collocations compared against the performance of the control group participants, as indicated in the learners' translation of these idioms and cultural expressions in the test items assessed by the overall scores, and the overall effectiveness as expressed by the summation of both comprehension and cultural translation scores. The *t*-value differences between all groups show that

the experimental group that was trained on cultural corpus translation yielded the best results.

Table 1: t-test Results of the differences between both Groups

Group	Lingua-cultural Comprehension		Cultural Translation		Lingua-cultural Comprehension & Cultural Translation	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Experimental group (25)	7.08	2.00	5.04	2.35	7.88	2.160
Control Group (26)	5.28	2.25	7.20	2.16	6.72	2.28
t-value	4.20		4.30		4.89	
p	.00001		.00001		.05	

It is evident from the above table that the t-values on comprehension and cultural translation as well as on the aggregate comprehension and cultural translation are all statistically significant to the good of the experimental group. In addition, the results of the study also indicate the fact that training the students on transculturation of literary corpus from the target language culture into Arabic culture facilitates Saudi EFL learners' comprehension of cultural features of the literary eras to which the texts belonged.

The experimental group outperformed the control group that indulged in consulting the bilingual dictionary for their translation. In the light of this finding, it could be concluded that EFL translation students' performance in translating culture-bound English expressions and idioms excerpted from literary corpus has improved after the training programme as reflected by their scores on the culture-based translation test. As mentioned before, it seems that training on culture-specific literary corpus translation to reach out for the correct meanings may have helped the experimental group, while they had enough knowledge of vocabulary so as to understand the defining vocabulary items available in their dictionaries.

Conclusions & Suggestions

This study strongly supports the view that culture influences comprehension and interpretation, and hence the significance of cross-culture awareness for apposite, sound translation. When reading a text, especially literary corpus, readers acquire meaning from the text by analyzing words and sentences against the backdrop of their own personal knowledge of the world which, in turn, is conditioned by their culture (See Galibert; Sa'edi, for further relevant discussions). However, in translating foreign corpus, an awareness of the culture of the target language needs to be conditioned, too. In other words, the target culture influences knowledge, beliefs, and values, and they, in turn, provide an interpretive framework which the reader will utilize during reading.

Findings of the present research, commensurate with prior research (Savory; Nida and Taber; Lotman; Pena), and confirm the fact that the target culture understanding can be conducive to better comprehension, and consequently, to more apposite translations. Since the target culture literary texts used in the present study depicted different aspects of the indigenous EFL culture, which they have been exposed to and familiarized with in other literature courses, there were more in line with the readers' knowledge, beliefs, and values and thus more comprehensible to the participants. These findings warrant the observations that the use of literature in translation teaching can better induce more improved culture-specific interpretation of literary corpus (Woolsey; Rees, 197; Beichman; Venuti; Cook-Sather).

The study also showed, at least in the theoretical body, that there is a close relationship between language and culture has become virtually axiomatic. Being the primary means of human communication, language is bound up with culture in multiple and complex ways. In this vein, Kramsch adeptly explained that language expresses cultural reality, embodies cultural reality, and symbolizes cultural reality. Therefore, a short story, a novel or a play written in English language by an English writer expresses, embodies, and symbolizes the realities of the English culture. According to Bock,

there are considerable differences, amongst pieces of literary discourse from different cultures because each culture's literature contains characters, events, themes, and value systems that are common within that specific culture but not necessarily known or understood by other cultures (72-73).

Indeed, transculturation is a process of changing the cultural elements of the target language discourse into the learners' own culture so that it can express, embody, and symbolize the cultural reality of the learner's life and experiences.

The findings of this study are consistent with the results found in Erten and Razi and in Razi, too, that transculturation of literature corpus from target language culture into learner's own culture enhances their comprehension of this corpus and enables better rendition skills. Findings from the present study are also commensurate with the results of prior research on the relationship between cultural modification of texts and reading comprehension (e.g., Chihara et al.; Sasaki), demonstrating that adapting texts to conform to the learners' cultural expectations makes these texts more comprehensible to the readers of the rendered texts.

The findings of this study also lend further support to the larger body of research which has investigated the role of cultural background knowledge or cultural schemata in reading comprehension and culture translation (See Abu-Rabia; Carrell; Droop & Verhoeven; Johnson; Pritchard; Steffensen & Joag-dev; and Steffensen). In line with these studies, the current study suggests that translators be exposed to the different socio-linguistic and cultural features of target texts that deal with both the source language and the translation language cultures and for which they have well-developed cultural background knowledge than texts that deal with a less familiar or unfamiliar

culture and for which they lack the appropriate cultural schemata in order to be able to produce culturally appropriate versions of rendered texts.

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